



CLIMATE CHANGE: 'A Period of Uncertainty Has Closed'

Interview by Ramesh Jaura*

BONN, Feb 11 (IPS) - The coming into force of Kyoto Protocol Feb. 16 may not be enough to combat global warming but it closes "a period of uncertainty", says Joke Waller-Hunter, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The Convention's Secretariat has since 1996 been located in Bonn in the aftermath of the first Conference of the Parties (COP1) to the Convention in Berlin. The Convention gave birth to the Kyoto Protocol agreed in Kyoto in Japan in December 1997 at COP3.

A series of official events will be held around the globe Feb. 16 to celebrate the entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol. A special feature of the commemoration will be a 'Kyoto Relay of Messages', with Japan's Environment Minister Yuriko Koike serving as Master of Ceremonies. Some ten dignitaries will exchange messages on a video hook-up.

"The Protocol offers powerful new tools and incentives that governments, businesses and consumers can use to build a climate-friendly economy and promote sustainable development," Waller-Hunter said in an exclusive interview before her departure to attend the commemorative event in Kyoto.

An abridged version of the interview follows:

Q: The Kyoto Protocol enters into force on Feb. 16 nearly seven years after it was adopted. Isn't it already too late in the day for the Protocol to be effective?

A: It's never too late. In fact a period of uncertainty has closed. Climate change is ready to take its place again at the top of the global agenda.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the most up-to-date scientific research suggests that humanity's emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases will raise global average temperatures by 1.4-5.8 degrees C by the end of the century. They will also affect weather patterns, water resources, the cycling of the seasons, ecosystems and extreme climate events.

Scientists have already detected many early signals of global warming, including the shrinking of mountain glaciers and Arctic and Antarctic sea-ice, reduced ice cover on lakes and rivers, longer summer growing seasons, changes in the arrival and departure dates of migratory birds, the spread of many insects and plants towards the poles, and much more.

The clock is ticking, and in 2005 we must grasp the nettle of designing climate strategy beyond 2012.

If you ask me whether Kyoto Protocol is enough, I'll say by itself it will not suffice. But the Kyoto Protocol brings movement. You do the first step before you start on a journey. The legally binding Kyoto Protocol is a first step toward combating global warming. It offers powerful new tools and incentives that governments, businesses and consumers can use to build a climate-friendly economy and promote sustainable development. Given the political will, it can go a long way in dealing with global warming. In fact, February 16 marks the beginning of a new era in international efforts to reduce the risk of climate change.



Q: What new policies and new approaches does the coming into force of Kyoto Protocol mean?

A: For the first time in the history of international environment policy, the rules have been set for the use of unique instruments that allow emission reductions in the most cost-effective manner. A new commodity has been created: carbon. A new modality for support to sustainable development in developing countries, with associated private investments and technology transfer is operational: the Clean Development Mechanism.

As a result of the Kyoto Protocol, 35 industrialised countries and the European Community are legally bound to reduce their combined emissions of six major greenhouse gases during the five-year period 2008-2012 to below 1990 levels.

The 'emissions trading' regime enables industrialised countries to buy and sell emissions credits among themselves; this market-based approach will improve the efficiency and cost effectiveness of emissions cuts.

The Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) gets a major boost. The CDM encourages investments in developing country projects that promote sustainable development while limiting emissions.

Also the Protocol's Adaptation Fund, established in 2001, can become operational to assist developing countries to cope with the negative effects of climate change.

In the private sector, many pro-active companies have chosen to be part of the solution. Climate friendly technologies are finding their way into the market. The pace of research on new technologies, like hydrogen and large-scale application of carbon sequestration, seems to be picking up. Many challenges remain. Look at the transport sector, where emissions continue to increase. But it is encouraging to note that the emission intensity of the world's economy has fallen, as emissions are growing more slowly than GDP.

Q: Australia and the United States have refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. With 21 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG, the gases that lead to global warming, principally carbon dioxide and methane) emissions and enormous technical and technological capacity, it is hard to imagine a successful climate future without active U.S. participation. Are there concrete signals that under pressure from businesses and environmental NGOs, these countries would take necessary steps to meet Kyoto targets availing of all the instruments the Kyoto Protocol offers?

A: Even though Australia has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol, the country's government has committed itself to fulfilling Kyoto Protocol targets. The U.S. has not ratified the Protocol. But some action is underway, particularly at the state level. Nearly 40 U.S. states have developed their own climate plans, an emission-trading system is emerging in the Northeast states, and nearly 20 states have adopted aggressive standards for renewable energy. Additionally, there have been more than 100 congressional proposals related to climate policy -- from representatives of nearly every state -- in the past two years. Businesses too are beginning to take emissions reductions more seriously.

Q: Developing countries, including Brazil, China, India and Indonesia, are also parties to the Protocol but do not have emission reduction targets. In fact they insist that the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change requires the developed countries to take the lead in combating climate change and its adverse effects. Do the Kyoto Protocol instruments suffice to assist and encourage developing countries reduce emissions and effectively address climate change?



A: Parties to the Convention have taken decisions to promote the development and transfer of environmentally sound technologies at each session of the COP. At COP 4 (the fourth conference of parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) in Buenos Aires in November 1998, as part of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action, parties decided to give new impetus to this issue by adopting a decision for establishing a "consultative process" on technology transfer.

Four years later, COP 8 put adaptation in the spotlight, by adopting the Delhi Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change and Sustainable Development. Ever since, evidence on the need to adapt has increased. The Convention process has an important role to play at the international level, but so do other international organisations. Effective approaches to international cooperation on adaptation need to be developed. At the national level, governments will be taking steps to identify vulnerability and risk, and developing policies to reduce these.

Q: "Ensure environmental stability" is the seventh among the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that will come up for review at the UN General Assembly next September. Do you expect some special initiatives by the international community to expedite measures aimed at achieving Kyoto targets?

A: Tackling global warming is essential for MDGs. Goal 7 leaves no doubt that climate change is causing rising sea levels that threaten coastal areas and even entire countries like island nations in the Pacific. Energy is one of the areas that shows most clearly the gaps between the global rich and the global poor, and the social and economic inequities that result. One billion of the world's poorest people do not have access to regular energy supplies, forcing them to clear trees for firewood or burn heavy-polluting fuels like kerosene that harm human health.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Tony Blair is committed to use Britain's G8 and EU presidencies to try to make a breakthrough on Africa and climate change. There is a need to develop a package of practical measures, largely focused on technology, to cut emissions. We need to find ways to implement the vast range of low-carbon technologies that have already been developed. We need energy efficiency, renewable energy sources, and cleaner fossil fuels.

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