

WEATHER UNLIKELY TO THAW DEADLOCK ON CLIMATE CHANGE¹

Alister Doyle©

OSLO, Norway -- This summer's extreme weather will spur more strident calls for action to combat global warming, but is unlikely to break a deadlock at UN climate talks about sharing the burden between rich and poor.

Islamabad, for instance, has blamed mankind's emissions of greenhouse gases for devastating floods that have killed up to 1,600 people. And Russian President Dmitry Medvedev similarly directly linked the summer heat wave on global warming.

But there is no sign so far that major emitters -- Russia is the number three greenhouse gas emitter behind China and the United States -- are offering to do more to combat climate change to overcome gridlock at UN talks. One delegate at the last UN talks, in Bonn a few days ago, said there was a "huge sense of inertia" despite worries about extreme weather and UN projections that 2010 would be the warmest year since records began in the 1850s.

And there are risks that extreme weather will add to, rather than resolve, tensions between rich nations, historically most to blame for global warming, and poor countries most vulnerable to floods, droughts and cyclones.

Climate change might even supplant decades-old debate about the legacy of colonial rule as a cause of friction between rich and poor nations.

"Global warming could turn into the post-colonial argument, which could destroy much of the negotiating possibilities," said Johan Rockstrom, head of the Stockholm Resilience Centre at Stockholm University.

"Climate change is becoming a much more firm reality on the ground for many countries," said Saleemul Huq, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development in London.

He said that would bring a greater sense of urgency at the next annual UN climate talks of environment ministers in Mexico, from Nov. 29 to Dec. 10, after the Copenhagen summit last December agreed only a non-binding deal to slow climate change.

Rich and poor nations are already split about how to share out needed curbs on greenhouse gas emissions. Developing nations say the rich must make deeper cuts while the rich want poor nations to limit their growing emissions.

Experts doubt major breakthroughs at the Cancun talks, partly because the United States has not joined other developed nations in capping emissions.

Russia and Pakistan have squarely linked extreme weather to global warming -- going beyond

¹ Vancouver Sun, Reuters, August 18, 2010

<http://www.vancouversun.com/news/Weather+unlikely+thaw+deadlock+climate+change/3411356/story.html>

the views of most climate scientists that climate change merely loads the dice in favour of extreme weather but cannot be linked to individual events.

Pakistan's Environment Minister Hameed Ullah Jan Afridi said global warming was the "main cause" of floods and noted that Pakistan emits just 0.4 per cent of world greenhouse gases. More than two million were made homeless in Pakistan's worst floods ever.

Medvedev said of wildfires and Russia's drought on Aug. 4: "Unfortunately, what is happening now in our central regions is evidence of this global climate change, because we have never in our history faced such weather conditions in the past."

"That's a very good sign for the Russian public, which still has a lot of doubts about climate change," said Alexei Kokorin of the WWF conservation group in Russia. He said many Russians doubted that global warming was caused by mankind.

Arild Moe, an expert on Russian climate policy at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Oslo, said Medvedev had sometimes failed to carry out hints of tougher policies in the past.

"Medvedev has said many correct things on many issues, from corruption to the role of NGOs, but they have not got embedded in a legal process," Moe said. And Moscow's goal for greenhouse gas emissions in 2020 foresees a rise from current levels. Russia's emissions tumbled after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and were still 33 per cent below 1990 levels in 2008.

China, the top greenhouse gas emitter ahead of the United States, has not directly blamed climate change for recent floods and landslides, though a commentary in the Beijing Daily last week said an increased frequency of disasters meant "climate change presents a real threat to China's natural ecological systems and economic and social development."