

UN Launches Global Climate Week: September 21-25 - Sri Lanka must act now

by Asoka Abeygunawardana

The preeminent geopolitical issue of our time challenging the 6.5 billion people living on earth is neither terrorism nor the food crisis but the climate catastrophe. Three weeks ago the UN Secretary General Mr. Ban Ki-Moon visited the Arctic. In his article published on September 17, 2009 in the New York Times he says "I saw the remains of a glacier that just a few years ago, was a majestic mass of ice. It had collapsed. Not slowly melted - collapsed. I am all the more convinced we must act - now". On Sept. 22 the UN Secretary General is convening a special summit on climate change at the United Nations for some 100 world leaders. Their collective challenge: transform the climate crisis into an opportunity for safer, cleaner, sustainable green growth for all. Mr. Ban Ki-Moon will have a simple message to convey to leaders: "The world needs you to actively push for a fair, effective and ambitious deal in Copenhagen. Fail to act, and we will count the cost for generations to come".

To encourage the world leaders to act the first-ever Global Climate Week from September 21-25 was officially launched in the German city of Hamburg, kicking off a week of synchronized activity around the world for urgent action to combat climate change. On September 21st / 22nd, on the eve of the UN General Assembly's climate session, "The Age of Stupid" was launched internationally at the biggest and greenest live film event the world has ever seen. A-list celebrities walk the green carpet to a solar powered cinema tent in downtown New York, linked by satellite to 700 cinemas in 50+ countries. 'The Age of Stupid' is a new cinema documentary starring Oscar-nominated Pete Postlethwaite as an old man living in the devastated world of 2055, watching 'archive' footage from 2008 and asking: why didn't we stop climate change while we had the chance? The world in which the Archivist lives is the clearly visible destination of present 'business as usual' policies regarding greenhouse gas emissions.

It should be noted that climate models have largely been proven correct by history whilst economic models have almost always been proven wrong and the current temperature change is realistic for a business-as-usual scenario. Given below are three extreme predictions of climate models.

Even at a less than 2^o C temperature increase the Arctic sea icecap disappears, leaving polar bears homeless and changing the Earth's energy balance dramatically as reflective ice is replaced during summer months by a darker sea surface. This is expected by at least by 2030 if not earlier. Tropical coral reefs suffer severe and repeated bleaching episodes due to hotter ocean waters killing off most coral and delivering a hammer blow to marine biodiversity. Droughts spread through the sub-tropics, accompanied by heat waves and intense wildfires. Worst-hit are the Mediterranean, the south-west United States, southern Africa and Australia. The recent, dramatic, uncontrollable, landscape changing wildfires in the USA, Greece and Australia send a dire warning to the world of worse to come.

At a 3^o C- 4^o C temperature increase global food production is under threat as key breadbaskets in Europe, Asia and the United States suffer drought and heat waves outstrip the tolerance of crops.

At a 6^o C and above temperature increase the Arctic region sees temperatures rise much higher than average: up to 20^o C - meaning the entire Arctic is ice-free all year round. Most of the tropics, sub-tropics and even lower mid-latitudes are too hot to be inhabitable (excessive heat and drought). Sea level rise is now rapid enough to ensure that coastal cities across the world are largely abandoned. Most sea life is dead. Human refuges are now confined entirely to highland areas and the polar regions. Human

population is drastically reduced. Perhaps 90% of species become extinct, rivaling the worst mass extinctions in the Earth's 4.5 billion-year history. Could the surface of the Earth become like Venus, entirely uninhabitable?

The 'business as usual' scenario of establishing 3370 MW of coal power plants in Sri Lanka is to increase its Carbon Dioxide emissions by 820% against its 1990 level by 2020. If the developing world is to follow the foot path of Sri Lanka the 6⁰ C temperature will be a reality in the early second half of this century. The period in between will be truly 'The Age of Stupid'.

If efforts to reduce climate-changing emissions fail, global warming will be one of the main drivers of human conflict in decades ahead as resources dwindle and competition increases. The ecological impacts are the underlying drivers of social collapse. It is much easier to predict physical planetary change than the human social response to it. Resilient human social systems can collapse with alarming speed. Climate change rewrites the global equation for development, peace and prosperity. It threatens markets, economies and development gains. It can deplete food and water supplies, provoke conflict and migration, destabilize fragile societies and even topple governments.

Here is a true leader of the new world: Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed spoke to the media during a news conference in Male, September 7, 2009 on the government plans for climate change. The President of the Maldives seeking to set an example has established goals to turn the Maldives into the first nation to be carbon neutral by 2020. Over 80 percent of the Maldives's land, composed of coral islands scattered some 850 km across the equator, is less than one meter above the mean sea level. The rising sea levels are forecast to submerge most of its islands by 2100. The 200 inhabited islands in the Maldives want to switch over to solar and wind-driven generators and authorities hope to drastically reduce the number of motorcycles that choke Male's narrow streets.

The zero-carbon initiative, he said, would set an example to the rest of the world, but was also the best answer to the Maldives' energy and development needs. "We know that the Maldives becoming carbon neutral is not going to decarbonize the world and stop us from annihilation. We know that. But at least we could die knowing we've done the right thing," he said.

It is time for the Sri Lanka to learn from its little brother: the Maldives, and drop its current plans for establishing 3370 MW of coal power plants by 2020. Our well learned Environmental Minister Honorable Patali Champika Ranawaka and his Ministry is the focal point of Sri Lanka at the Climate Catastrophe negotiations. Will he be able to convey the message of the younger and future generations to the head of state and help him to find the right track for the post fossil fuel era? Dear Minister, there are just over 75 days left for the Copenhagen summit to seal the deal. ACT – now!