

Durban conference, committing to the commitment

The United Nations climate conference in Durban, South Africa, from Nov. 28 to Dec. 9 will be another attempt to achieve what the annual meeting failed to accomplish in Copenhagen in 2009: A legally binding global agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The first commitment period of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which binds only developed nations to reduce emissions, expires at the end of 2012. A more comprehensive pact was the goal in Copenhagen, but the divide between developed and developing countries has not yet been bridged. That was still the case at the 2010 conference in Cancun, Mexico, and will remain so in Durban unless a quantum leap occurs. The developed nations want developing nations to enter a legally binding accord in a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. The developing nations insist that they should be allowed to make their own cuts voluntarily. Their argument is that the bulk of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are a result of the extensive use of fossil-based fuels (coal, oil and gas) by economically advanced nations since the Industrial Revolution. Thus the burden of emissions reduction should fall on developed nations, the developing countries say. The United States and European Union nations were responsible for 54 percent of energy-related carbon dioxide emissions from 1900 to 2007, writes Kelly Rigg, the chief of Tck Tck Tck, a coalition of 200 NGOs pushing for a global climate deal.

Although the US, the world's biggest emitter, did not sign up in Kyoto, the protocol does work. It is on track to achieve an emissions reduction of 5.2 percent below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. This represents a 29 percent reduction of emissions levels that would be expected without the protocol. But this progress can be undone if the Kyoto Protocol is allowed to lapse with no clear replacement for a legally binding accord. All nations involved in the conference say they are committed to finding a climate solution, but arriving at such a long-term, common solution is indeed difficult. Indonesia wants developed nations, particularly the United States, to sign up for a second commitment period. "We want to appeal to their noble senses," Rachmat Witoelar, the Indonesian President's special envoy for climate change told a pre-Durban roundtable with journalists. The Obama administration is not the obstacle. It's the US Congress that is influenced by fossil-fuel-related interests that object to carbon emission reductions. Get the United States to make a statement of commitment and an agreement can be reached in the conference after Durban, Witoelar implored. While Indonesia does not want to sign a legally binding accord, it has taken the lead in volunteering unilateral cuts. It wants the Durban conference to move on the Bali Roadmap as an ongoing process, the executive chair of the National Council on Climate Change says. The roadmap is an accord that was reached at the 2007 climate conference in Bali, to resolve differences between developed and developing nations. It has two negotiating tracks. One is to discuss long-term post-2012 issues. The second track is resolving commitments to the Kyoto Protocol. Negotiations on both tracks should have been completed at the Copenhagen conference in 2009. Although Durban may not promise a definitive, all-encompassing pact, what could be a realistic expectation is a series of smaller steps that eventually build up to the ultimate, global accord. Those achievable steps could include idea-sharing. Indonesia could share its REDD+ initiative in unilaterally reducing emissions from deforestation. Linked to this sharing of information would be voluntary cuts by developing nations. Meanwhile, Australia can explain its US\$25 per ton carbon tax scheme that it legislated in October. This is a tax on pollution, a financial disincentive for those who damage the environment. Other achievable steps are the establishment of mechanisms in financing and technology transfer. On finance, a pre-Durban meeting in Panama City on Oct. 1-7 discussed implementing a \$30 billion fast-track fund by 2012 to precede a \$100 billion fund by 2020.

On technology transfer, talk is on the setting up of a Technology Executive Committee (TEC) that will give policy direction. Another body being fleshed out is the Climate Technology Center and Network (CTC-N). Its job is to undertake the actual technology transfer to developing countries. Two outstanding issues of the CTC-N are the shaping of the governance body and determining the host country. For its part, Indonesia still stands to benefit from these shorter-term goals even if no major multilateral deal is reached. Beyond that, Indonesia will continue to engage in bilateral partnerships. In paraphrasing Lord Stern, the author of the highly acclaimed and equally criticized 2006 Stern Report on economics and climate change, the cost of action that nations undertake to reduce risks of climate change will be less than the cost of inaction and living with climate change.

The writer teaches journalism at the Dr. Soetomo Press Institute in Jakarta.