

Troubled Talks, Gapping Gulf and Courageous Qatar

Doha-round on climate change

22 Nov 2012, Middle East

Four years ago, at this time of the year, I was in Doha, capital city of Qatar, for the 20th Meeting of the Parties (MOP) to the Montreal Protocol on substances that deplete the Ozone Layer. I was leading the UNEP OzonAction Programme, which enabled the developing countries to comply with the phase out of the Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS). Though the meeting centered around the protection of the stratospheric ozone shield, that protects the life on the earth, there were serious scientific and technology discussion on the links between the climate change and the recovery of the ozone layer and *vice a versa*.

No country as tiny as Qatar-of length less than 200 KMs and width of 90 KMs - had ever hosted international meeting of the Multilateral Environment Agreements. In the 'Doha Declaration' that time Government of Qatar announced the launch of Ozone Layer and Climate Change Research Centre, within its Science and Technology Park and in collaboration with the UNEP. This centre would conduct scientific research to find environment-friendly alternatives to Ozone Depleting Substances. It was first ever attempt by any developing country to research into the scientific and technological linkages between the Montreal Protocol and the Kyoto Protocol.

The delegates from more than 140 countries and officials of United Nations were quite appreciative of Government of Qatar, not only because of the excellent logistic arrangements by this peninsula-country piercing into the Persian Gulf, but for the fact that Qatar had phased out nearly all the Ozone Depleting Substances including CFCs ahead of the Montreal Protocol's schedule. That was Qatar's stewardship to protect the environment- in 2008.

Come 2012. Qatar, is hosting yet another climate meeting-this time MOP to the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change. The meeting starts from this Monday, 26 November for two weeks. This remarkably petite but proactive host is unstoppable in its initiatives to hold the global talks. The world already knows Qatar as host for the trade related talks called 'Doha Rounds'.

The event starting on Monday is remarkable on another account.

Qatar has the highest per-capita Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions among all the countries -three times those of the United States, thanks to the Oil and Gas production. For the same reason, Qatar, with small population, has the second-highest GDP per capita in the world. Proven oil reserves of 15 billion will enable Qatar at current level to continue its production for more than 30 years. And

based on the current reserves of natural gas-the third largest in the world it will dominate the fossil fuel scenario for more than half a century. The host is therefore hosting international talks on reducing the emissions of GHGs on which its economy and development is founded. Any other country that is concerned of its image of 'significant producer of fossil fuel' and hence 'black sheep' among so-called 'greens' would have shied away. Not Qatar.

As per Kyoto Protocol, Qatar, like any other developing country is not required to take any legally binding emission reduction targets, but the stark contrast in hosting the global climate talks is obvious. The talks on climate change are already in troubled waters over last decade and the role of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), among whom Qatar is one of the members, is already creating wide gulf among the various negotiating groups. OPEC role in the climate change negotiations in demanding the compensation for their revenue loss in case of mitigation measures was found to be obstructive by the developed as well as some of the developing countries.

Amidst the criticism that the host country contributes in significant way to GHG emissions and that it had attended a major oil conference just a few days back and that former oil minister of Qatar would be leading the climate negotiations in Doha, I think of positivism here. I find that the event holds an unparalleled opportunity to open up inclusive negotiations.

Rewind. When I was heading the OzonAction Programme that encompassed 146 developing countries through UNEP's five offices, I had started holding the regional meetings of the government officials in the countries that had not mainstreamed the Montreal Protocol in their national priorities. Such meetings for example in Algeria, Belarus, Yemen, Vietnam, produced very early results. Thus indicating that Gulf countries are helping to close the gap in the positions of the developing countries and acknowledging the science and impacts of the climate change.

There are already signs that Gulf countries are flagging their ships to indicate that they are on board. The United Arab Emirates along with others has backed the extension of the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. Saudi Arabia, a staunch negotiator to protect the interest of OPEC countries, has taken moderated position with formation of new negotiating team. When I visited Saudi Arabia recently His Royal Highness Prince (HRH) Turki bin Nasser bin Abdul Aziz, President of Environment Affairs Office informed of his country's role in designing the common energy efficiency standards for the GCC countries. In September 2012, when I was in Dubai, the H.E. Dr. Rashid Ahmed Bin Fahad, UAE Minister of Environment and Water, informed about strict implementation of their building codes to save the energy in high rise buildings. In Oman, where I am presently holding talks on energy planning and waste management, I was informed of the government's strategy to diversify the energy resources to solar and convert waste-to-energy. An official there told me, "We see our role not as producers of oil and gas. We are the producers of energy that contributes to the development. Hence, we will explore all sources of energy".

I see that holding the Global meeting on Climate Change in Qatar, whose wealth depends mostly on fossil fuel that contributes to climate change, has in fact persuaded UN to accept their offer to be the host for this meeting. It is a good lesson for developed countries like UK, USA, Russia and Australia who have never hosted such climate meetings.

Indian ancient epic called 'Mahabharata' narrates the 18 day war between brothers, relatives and their armies. The negotiations were held every night over 18 days among the brothers. Venue of the negotiations? It was always the blood-stained battlefield. The negotiations held in the battle-ground, closer to reality were productive. Courageous Qatar should be congratulated for heralding new era of holding negotiations where it matters the most.

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