BAGUIO CITY, Philippines—December 6, 2013 (Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service)—Returning delegates of the recent UN climate change talks brought home not news of gloom and doom but something positive, which may yet help bring justice to island countries such as the Philippines that often get battered by extreme climate patterns attributed to greenhouse gas emission-related global warming.
“Some quarters make doom and gloom predictions every time a COP (Conference of Parties) of the UNFCCC (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) takes place. But this time, there were a few good developments,” said Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, executive director of Tebtebba, a global indigenous peoples’ centre based in the Philippines, pushing for indigenous peoples’ rights and climate justice and equity.

She cited the “Warsaw international mechanism for loss and damage associated with climate change impacts.”

The new mechanism is tasked to provide countries with technical support, facilitate actions and improve coordination work inside the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change or UNFCCC as well as with other organizations.

Most importantly, it will also mobilize and secure funds, technology and capacity-building activities to address “loss and damage,” which, according to Dr. Saleemul Huq of the London-based nongovernment International Institute for Environment and Development, is UN jargon for “liability and compensation.”

The mechanism represents a culmination of many years of work by developing countries to build on what is called the Bali Action Plan of 2007 to consider means to address “loss and damage” as well as earlier proposals by the Alliance of Small Island States (AO-SIS) dating back to 1991.

Indigenous peoples are among those who usually live in the most fragile ecosystems where the worst impacts of climate change are felt. “So having an agreement on loss and damage can be a good start to beef up support for indigenous peoples who suffer from such extreme events and slow onset events,” said Tauli-Corpuz.

“Slow onset events” refer to disasters that concentrate on one hazard such as drought whose effects would take months or years to be felt such as water and food shortage, and ultimately, famine. Pollution can also be considered a slow onset event, particularly in cases of growing concentration of toxic wastes, which may build up in years.

Slow onset events are thus opposed to “rapid onset events,” which arise suddenly or whose occurrence cannot be predicted in advance. These include earthquakes, cyclones or typhoons or windstorms, landslides and avalanches, wildfires, floods and volcanic eruptions.

There are already official UN humanitarian and disaster-response agencies apart from voluntary groups such as the Red Cross, Medicin Sans Frontier and Oxfam, which come into the scene whenever a calamity such as the recent typhoon, the 2005 Asian tsunami, or the Haiti earthquake, happens.

“But funds have to be raised when these events take place and that takes time and are not enough,” said Martin Khor of South Center, a Geneva-based intergovernmental organization of developing countries, who was in Warsaw for the climate change talks. “Also, countries that are hit are often too devastated or too poor to respond quickly.”

He cited the Philippines where it took days before outside help could reach survivors with food, health care and shelter. “And it will take years, if
ever, for shattered houses and cities and farmlands to be rebuilt,” he said.

Reports say total damage wrought by Haiyan/Yolanda has reached US$15 billion and government authorities say rebuilding would cost even more.

The loss and damage mechanism, says Khor, is thus meant to fill in the organizational and financial gaps within the UN Climate Convention, which is the global premier body dealing with climate change.

The UNFCCC presently mobilizes funds for mitigation (reduction of emissions) and adaptation (preparing for the effects of climate change such as building sea-walls and drainage systems) but until now it did not have the clear mandate for helping countries recover from loss and damage.

With the new mechanism, “a burst of pent-up energy and organizational efforts” can be expected at least from developing countries, which will also request for funding for this newly accepted issue of loss and damage within the UNFCCC, and to complement the work of other agencies, said Khor.

Citing studies, Khor said damage caused by natural disasters has risen
from about US$200 billion a year a
decade ago to around US$300-400 bil-
lion annually in recent years and that
climate change is exacerbating the inci-
dence and strength of extreme weather
events.

So delegates from both developing
and developed countries at the Conven-
tion hall in Warsaw were jubilant when
the “Warsaw international mechanism”
was gavelled after a last minute hitch in
the negotiations, said Khor.

Super typhoon and envoy’s appeal

For the new mechanism, Tauli-
Corpuz credited super typhoon Haiyan
(locally named Yolanda) that gave grim
backdrop to the climate change talks
in Warsaw, Poland and Philippine cli-
mate change envoy Naderev Saño, who
broke down and announced he would
fast “until a meaningful outcome is in
sight.”

“Typhoon Haiyan and Saño’s ap-
peal obviously helped the COP finally
decide on this (known in short as the

Increasingly strong typhoons continue to devastate indigenous peoples’ communities.
‘Warsaw international mechanism’),” she said.

A convenor of the Indigenous Peoples’ Global Partnership on Climate Change and Forests, Tauli-Corpuz along with lawyer Alaya de Leon of the Ateneo School of Government (ASOG) and Alejandrino Sibucao, Jr. of the Forest Management Bureau (FMB) of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) were part of the Philippine negotiators who dealt with REDD Plus.

REDD Plus refers to “Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries,” one of the UNFCCC’s broad range of actions.

Tauli-Corpuz considers the Warsaw international mechanism on loss and damage “an important achievement” and “one of the very few bright lights of the COP.”

**Other gains**

The Philippine delegation also cited other gains in Warsaw, which, it considers significant, especially in the wake of Haiyan/Yolanda’s impacts.

Tauli-Corpuz cited seven decisions on the REDD Plus. One of these includes the work program on “results-based” REDD Plus finance in which the Conference of Parties reaffirmed and recognized the need to provide “adequate and predictable” financial and technology support to developing countries that aim to slow, halt and reverse forest cover and carbon loss.

This decision agrees that developing country Parties seeking to obtain and receive results-based payments should provide the most recent summary of information on how all the REDD plus safeguards have been addressed and respected before they can receive results-based payments.

(What are some common elements that define results-based payments? A few elements: unit is ton of carbon dioxide equivalent, there is a reference level, performance assessed against a baseline with corresponding payment, and a common concept of monitoring, review and verification.)

This COP decision also decides that an information hub will be established which will include information on the results of REDD Plus activities and corresponding results-based payments. This hub will include, among others, the assessed forest reference emission levels and/or forest reference levels expressed in tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per year and a summary of information on how all of the safeguards are being addressed and respected.

The decision also recognizes the importance of “incentivising” (or giving incentives to) non-carbon benefits or the multiple functions of forests (ensuring steady supply of water, biodiversity conservation, forest-based livelihoods, poverty alleviation, etc.) for the long term sustainability of REDD Plus. Decisions adopted in the Doha 18th COP called on Parties to make submissions by 2014, which will elaborate on what are non-carbon benefits and how to
“incentivise” these and non-market approaches for REDD Plus implementation.

Another was the Philippines interpretative statement on the third preambular paragraph on the decision on drivers of deforestation and forest degradation. It clarified that traditional livelihoods of indigenous peoples such as rotational farming do not destroy forests.

The Philippines said that many of the remaining tropical forests in the world are found in indigenous communities because they persisted in strengthening and using their “sustainable traditional forest knowledge, management and governance systems.”

This interpretative statement clarifying that traditional livelihoods do not drive deforestation and forest degradation was supported by Mexico (on behalf of the Environment Integrity Group), Brazil, The Netherlands (for the European Union) and Australia (for the Umbrella Group).

Strongly supporting the statement were indigenous peoples’ organizations under the IIPFCC (International Indigenous Peoples’ Forum on Climate Change) and other NGOs.

Tauli-Corpuz cited other decisions such as the “modalities” for measuring, reporting and verifying anthropogenic forest-related emissions by sources and removals by sinks, forest carbon stocks, and forest area changes resulting from REDD Plus implementation. Guidelines on how to make these transparent and consistent over time were included in an Annex.

Almost 20 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, which, scientists say, cause climate change, come from deforestation, forest degradation and conversion of forestlands into other uses, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

But all these efforts need money and the 19th Conference of Parties in Warsaw is credited for assuring financing for the REDD Plus program. “It remains to be seen whether these decisions will truly allow REDD Plus to be fully implemented,” said Tauli-Corpuz.

She hopes that this package of decisions will finally put a stop to deforestation and forest degradation and she linked this to the recent catastrophe in the Philippines caused by Typhoon Haiyan. “If REDD Plus results into the rehabilitation and regeneration of mangrove and coastal forests in an archipelagic country like the Philippines and protect the indigenous peoples and environment from potential REDD Plus-related social and environmental risks, then all those long days and sleepless nights of negotiating this package will be worthwhile,” she said.

There could have been better gains in Warsaw for indigenous peoples. “But what can one expect of a global process which needs to accommodate conflicting interests of 193 Parties?” she asked. Still, she said, getting loss and damage and REDD Plus decisions in place, are “good building blocks to build upon for the coming years.” - Maurice Malanes