Key issues dominating the Poznan talks

Poznan, 1 Dec (Martin Khor) -- Talks under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) started at the ancient Polish town of Poznan today, at the half way mark between the Bali meeting last December and the Copenhagen meeting in December 2009 which is scheduled to produce an outcome from the Bali Roadmap to address the global climate crisis.

The 14th Conference of Parties (COP) of the UNFCCC opened with speeches made by the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk as well as Anders Rasmussen, the Prime Minister of Denmark that will host next year's important 15th COP.

Tusk urged the parties to “show patience and understanding with one another” in a spirit of solidarity, alluding to tough negotiations expected, as there are many deep-seated divisions, especially on North-South lines.

Rasmussen said the financial crisis should not divert from combating climate change, which he described as the right environmental and economic choice. While developed countries must show the way, we need a global approach involving all nations to solve this problem, he said. He was alluding to the need for developing countries, or at least some of them, to contribute to climate-related actions.

Statements were also made by the Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UNFCCC executive secretary Yvo de Boer, and representatives of major groupings, including the G77 and China, the EU, the Africa Group, the LDC Group, the Umbrella Group (Australia speaking) and the Environmental Integrity Group (Switzerland speaking).

The opening plenary of the ad hoc working group on long-term cooperative action (AWG-LCA) was also held this afternoon. This is the group mandated by the Bali meeting to follow up on the Bali Action Plan, whose aim is the full implementation of the commitments in the Convention, and which is being discussed under the five issues of “shared vision”, mitigation, adaptation, finance and technology.

The climate talks last December launched the Bali Action Plan, which commits governments to conclude a deal by the end of 2009 on mitigation (actions to avoid and reduce emissions), adaptation (actions to deal with effects of climate change), finance and technology (the means by which developing countries are to be assisted by developed countries to take action).

The next fortnight’s talks in Poznan takes place under the shadow of the global financial crisis. It has a mainly negative aspect as governments are so preoccupied with the disastrous economic situation and are spending so much money to counter it that they are tempted to shelve actions on climate change.

But it has positive aspects too. The trillions of dollars spent by the United States and European countries to bail out their banks show that if there is a serious enough cause (in this case, saving the economic system), the governments can come up with the funds.
There is thus little excuse for the developed countries not to provide funds and technology in large quantities to developing countries to help them undertake the technological and organizational revolution required to address climate change.

Besides the effects of the financial crisis, there are several other key issues that are expected to dominate the Poznan talks, in the official meetings and the corridors.

First is the role and stand of the United States, which has for many years been the “problem member” of the Convention. It pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol years ago, thus depriving the framework of binding commitments from the world's chief emitter. The Bush administration has also been a “climate skeptic”, and the country's emissions have been rising.

With President-elect Barrack Obama promising a big change in the US' position on climate change, there are big hopes that the US will in some significant way join the other countries in fashioning a new set of emission reduction commitments for developed countries after the first Kyoto commitment period ends in 2012.

There is no expectation of any change in position of the US delegation at Poznan. However, several Obama or pro-Obama persons (including senior Congress staffers) are expected in Poznan, and the other participants will be looking out for some positive smoke signals from the incoming US administration and the new Congress.

Second, there will be references in Poznan to the failure of many developed countries to take sufficient action, as Greenhouse Gas emissions have continued to rise in many countries (such as the United States, Canada, Japan). A UNFCCC report just two weeks ago revealed that there was hardly any progress in reducing the developed countries' overall emissions in the most recent five years.

Neither have the developed countries met their commitments on financial and technology transfers to developing countries. They are thus not in any good position to lecture to developing countries or to pressure them to take on new commitments.

Third, there is an anticipation that some significant progress must be made on finance and technology. This is especially because the Group of 77 and China have tabled two detailed proposals to establish a financial architecture and a technology transfer mechanism within the UNFCCC.

The proposals are aimed at getting the Conference of Parties to establish new institutions to get the all-important finance and technology issues off the ground after too many years of talking, without any significant progress. The G77 and China is pressing the developed countries to implement their finance and technology transfer commitments, as a condition for serious discussion on some other issues that developed countries are pushing for.

The developing countries want Poznan to focus on making progress on finance and technology. They expect the developed countries to respond, and positively, to their new proposals, which had been presented at the end of the Accra talks last August.

If there is no such positive response, the developing countries will be most disappointed at Poznan and the atmosphere will be soured.

The developed countries meanwhile have their own priorities. The fourth issue at Poznan will be the proposed “differentiation” of developing countries.

Japan has issued a paper stating that many developing countries must commit themselves to take targets for reducing emissions or improving energy efficiency.
Australia also recently submitted a paper proposing new categorising of developing countries, naming Singapore, Malta and Korea as among “advanced economies” that are not currently members of Annex I countries (which are obliged to undertake binding emission reduction commitments under the Kyoto Protocol). The paper also has three lists of developing countries which respectively have higher per capital income than Ukraine and Portugal and a greater Human Development Index than Turkey.

Ukraine and Turkey are Annex I countries and Portugal is an Annex II country. As Annex I and Annex II of the Kyoto Protocol are lists of developed countries that have binding and quantified commitments to reduce their emissions, the implication is that the developing countries listed in the Australian paper should also undertake commitments.

Since Bali, the United States and the European Union have also made a similar demand that various developing countries should undertake greater commitments than presently.

The developed countries have been demanding that the meetings agree to “differentiation” among developing countries, with the aim to get selected developing countries to undertake new emission-reduction or mitigation commitments.

However, the developing countries generally are refusing to be “differentiated”. They do not recognise the methods by which the categorisation exercise is being carried out by the developed countries. They also point out that developed countries are historically responsible for most of the Greenhouse Gases in the atmosphere and that they should therefore be the only ones to undertake binding commitments to reduce emissions, in line with the present Convention and the Kyoto Protocol.

The developing countries also point to the inadequate actions of the developed countries so far, and insist that in the next few years the focus of the UNFCCC should be to get the developed countries to fully implement their obligations.

The developed countries are positioning themselves to further advocate their demand on differentiation at the Poznan meeting, and most of the developing countries are expected to continue their strong resistance. The mood had soured considerably when this issue was brought up at the Accra meeting, and there is the danger that a further souring will take place if the issue surfaces again at Poznan.

A fifth issue is the developed countries' top priority to get agreement on a “global goal” for emission reduction. The most cited figure is a 50% global cut in 2050 compared to the 1990 level. The EU failed to get this goal accepted at Bali and since then. It will try again in Poznan.

Many developing countries do not want such a long-term goal to be adopted, at least not at this stage of the talks. They believe that setting a global goal would also result in developing countries accepting a reduction target for themselves, since the developed countries are also setting a target for themselves.

For example, if the global goal is 50% reduction and the developed countries set a target of 70% for themselves, the developing countries may implicitly be asked to take on a residual cut of 30%. And this would be a much deeper cut for developing countries on a per capita basis. The developing countries are not willing to take on such an onerous target for themselves, especially when there is no confidence that the required ands promised technology or finance are forthcoming.

The global goal issue is incorporated in the wider issue of a “shared vision”. And this shared vision appears to be the main theme of the Poznan programme, since it is featuring in a workshop and a “contact group” (during which more details, usually aimed at getting a decision). Most of all, it is the theme chosen for
a Ministerial Roundtable during the high-level segment on 11-12 December.

The inter-related questions of the shared vision and the global goal can thus be expected to dominate the Poznan talks.