Chilly reception in Copenhagen

Nerves were on edge at the climate conference in Copenhagen. Negotiations were tough. Delegates stood for hours in front of the conference centre. S&WE accompanied representatives of several organisations during their stay in Copenhagen.

Everybody is equal in the queue outside the Copenhagen Congress Center. People trying to get ahead all met with the words, “no exceptions.” The heads of major power companies had to queue up right alongside the Greenpeace delegates and journalists. Suddenly, someone from the rear of the queue shouts out, “I’m for global warming.” Several of those standing about repeat the phrase, breaking into a spontaneous chant, their feet stomping in cadence. It’s no wonder; with the mercury hovering just above zero, the queued-up masses are shivering. They’ve been standing for two hours, waiting to be let through the tiny doors on the back side of the conference hall to the world climate conference. Stern glances from police officers patrolling back and forth along the queue bring the chanters back in line.

Some 15,000 people fit into the halls of the conference facility, but more than twice that number registered. The United Nations Climate Change Conference COP15 in Copenhagen spans two weeks, the second being the most exciting, because that is the week when the heads of the 192 participating states debate over what their delegates have negotiated during the first week. Thus, quite a large number of participants arrived on the Monday of the second week of the conference. Rainer Hinrichs-Rahlwes, a board member of the German Renewable Energy Association (Bundesverband Erneuerbare Energie, or BEE), is one of them. Renewables alone are scarcely touched upon at the conference. Of course, Hinrichs-Rahlwes finds that regrettable, “They are the only fully developed and available solution today. Only a complete switch (to renewables) can solve the climate problem,” he says. Nevertheless, the focus was on measures such as the Clean Development Mechanism and carbon emissions trading. The association, therefore, just like the European Renewable Energy Council (EREC), has no special status at the conference, although it has 30,000 members. Organisations obtain so-called observer status for the climate treaty negotiations only after a very bu-
Maruf Mallick has already been in Copenhagen a few days longer and has even made it into the conference centre. He is a journalist, the sole correspondent for Bangladesh, providing information on the conference to news agency bdnews24.com. Some 20 newspapers get their news from his agency. He has been sitting in the huge press centre every day for the past ten days, surrounded by hundreds of laptops and reporters from around the world. “Every day I go to three or four events and send my reports back to the editors,” he says.

Mallick’s country is one of those most severely affected by climate change. The country has repeatedly suffered floods; five million people are acutely threatened by drought, and 36 million people live in a coastal zone threatened with salinification, which would make the land useless for farming. Unlike industrialised countries, information is in short supply in Bangladesh. Of its some 150 million inhabitants, only 8 million use Blackberries, mobile phones or computers. “I am aware of the responsibility involved in the picture I paint of the conference and I know that my reporting is the only connection to Copenhagen for millions of people.”

But even Mallick cannot always find something new to report to his fellow countrymen. He is annoyed by the tendency of speakers to present well known information – what has been accomplished in previous years, for instance. That was the case at an event in which the effects of climate change on Bangladesh were rehashed. Mallick sits in the farthest corner of the room, entrenched behind his laptop. He hasn’t much time and immediately begins typing. Following the conference, he heads back to the media centre and sends his ad hoc news back home.

Then he has time for a sigh of relief and a chat. He tries not to sound indignant; after all, he wants to maintain journalistic neutrality. But he does not quite succeed. He would like to report more of his personal observations; for instance, that in the presentations about Bangladesh, the participants are invariably from Bangladesh. Whatever the case may be, he believes that renewable energy needs to be used much more in his home country.

On Tuesday morning, Rainer Hinrichs-Rahlwes of BEE makes a second attempt to get into the conference building. Like every morning, the masses descend on the centre grounds. Hinrichs-Rahlwes is blown away by the size of the event, even while standing in the queue. It is no wonder; all of the big UN organisations are there along with some 750 nongovernmental organisations from around the world.

For years climate protection advocates have been looking forward to the Copenhagen conference with anticipation. Companies wanted to earmark billions for investments based on the results of the conference. Thus, the direction of the conference had to be determined long ago. However, just weeks prior to its opening, there was a bad omen for the conference. Everyone is pointing fingers. Participants in the November APEC conference, the Asia-Pacific economic summit, avoided any clear endorsement of climate protection goals. For months it was unclear whether the US would commit to any decisive climate goals; or for that matter whether President Barack Obama would turn up at all. The Europeans were better off – but only at first glance. In the run-up to the conference, they wanted to commit to a CO₂ reduction of 20 % over 1990 levels by 2020, and in the event of a treaty were willing to raise the target to 30 %. But even that is not much from a global perspective. The world expected more of Europe – in the form of hard currency. “No money, no deal,” was heard over and over again at the climate summit from representatives of developing countries. But they too have done little in previous years. Until now, they have not been bound to establish CO₂ reduction targets; the Kyoto Protocol exempted them from doing so. Developing countries argued that such limitations would disrupt economic growth and the fight against poverty.

Ahead of the conference, however, there was also occasion for hope. With the publication of the fourth report of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in February 2007, the debate reached the broad masses, achieving its high point at the global climate con-
Conference on the Indonesian island of Bali in December 2007. More countries than ever before had presented proposals for greenhouse gas reductions before the Copenhagen conference. Furthermore, many countries had developed plans for adapting to climate change. Whether that was an adequate basis for an agreement was debated, however. The climate protection balance for the past few years is rather modest.

After nearly nine hours of waiting, Hinrichs-Rahlwes makes it into the building by evening. Exhausted, he makes his way to the registration table. Now, he is ready to hear an International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) presentation. Dozens of slides with lots of colourful graphics flash by, essentially explaining how and when renewables will surpass fossil fuels. “For me, there wasn’t much that was new,” Hinrichs-Rahlwes says two hours later. But seeing Greenpeace and the International Energy Agency sitting down at a table together was encouraging for him. Hinrichs-Rahlwes also found it a favourable development that the IEA finally considers renewables an important part of the global approach to a solution.

Slow pace wears down the delegates

The slow pace of the negotiation wears on the nerves of many of the participants; Desalegne Mesfin of Ethiopia for instance. Ethiopia too suffers very severely today as a consequence of climate change. Mesfin can scarcely absorb what is happening anymore. That comes as no surprise, considering he has spent some ten days at the conference attending up to five rounds of negotiations per day. For Africa, Mesfin is one of the most important negotiating partners at the delegate level and is the Deputy Director General of Ethiopia’s Environmental Protection Authority as well as the contact person for the Clean Development Mechanism in Ethiopia. “It is frustrating,” he says. Negotiations stretched on like rubber. In Brussels just a few days before the mammoth conference, he points out, Europeans approved € 7.2 billion – far too little money. And sometimes he can scarcely see how tangible results are possible at all, since everything is linked to everything else these days. “There is either unanimous agreement or none at all,” he says.

Mesfin can see right at his front door what happens if no progress is made. Currently Ethiopia is again experiencing either extreme droughts or flooding. Many of the consequences of climate change could be reduced in developing countries by simple means. The World Food Programme, for instance, uses a range of measures. Since 2000, the programme together with the Ethiopian government has helped a million people to counter extreme weather conditions and survive by farming. Some 750,000 acres of land have been reconverted with astounding results. Whole regions are becoming fruitful again through the use of simple dams to collect rainwater. “That is why I have been repeating my position like a mantra over the past few days,” Mesfin says in his talks about the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), one of the most important columns of climate protection. The CDM was created at the UN Conference in Kyoto in 1997; by late 2008 some 4,200 projects were underway at various stages globally. The CDM is designed to introduce modern technologies from industrialised countries to developing countries – for mutual benefit. Renewable energy sources are one of the technologies that could help.

The conference participants are not exposed to droughts and floods, and the weather in Copenhagen does not exactly provide a dramatic backdrop. “At the conference, I feel as if I’m in some great cocoon; even though the whole world is here,” says Hinrichs-Rahlwes. Within the conference halls, one is insulated even from the demonstrations outside the conference centre grounds where Danish police are using tear gas. But the agenda includes everything even remotely to do with climate protection – from soil erosion to rain forest reforestation. The continued rise in global population, which is placing a great strain on the climate, is also an important topic. Currently some seven billion people inhabit the earth. By 2050, the figure will climb to more than nine billion by today’s estimates – much of it in poor developing countries. Environmental changes have created 25 million refugees so far. By 2050, the United Nations estimates that there will be some 200 million climate refugees; that is more than the populations of Germany, France and Spain combined.

For Rainer Hinrichs-Rahlwes, his second day on the conference was his last. On Thursday he is no longer allowed into the conference. With the arrival of some 130 heads of state, the entire grounds are sealed off. Of the 18,000 representatives of NGOs, only a few hundred are allowed inside the halls.

Rainer Hinrichs-Rahlwes cannot say for certain today whether he will travel to yet another climate conference. “If it helps to spread knowledge about renewables, then I may come to the next conference as well.” But as the heads of state arrive, he sits, for the first time at this conference, over a cosy breakfast.
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