



24 OCTOBER 2009

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF CLIMATE ACTION

**“Spirit that freed South Africa must now
rescue the planet”**

OPED By Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The intense debate about dealing with climate change has mostly taken place between powerful players in the rich world. The battles between coal and oil companies, whose products cause climate change, and environmentalists have largely been fought in rich countries. The U.S., E.U. and China have driven negotiations on the international stage. Every top-level conversation has been about what’s thought to be possible—and often what’s convenient—for these strong forces.

But as the countdown begins to the decisive Copenhagen climate talks in December, new voices are making themselves heard—the voices of the first victims of climate change, more assertive and demanding of justice as the clear realities of what it all means become apparent. The UN lists 28 countries as most vulnerable to climate change, and 22 of them are in Africa.

In late August, the African Union’s chief negotiator at the Copenhagen climate talks, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, said that Africa would not only demand fair compensation for climate damage from the countries that caused the problem but would also demand that rich nations make a maximal effort to cut emissions and hold global warming to as few degrees as humanly possible. He has been joined by a chorus from around the continent calling for a new approach to dealing with climate change, one that takes poorer regions of the globe into account.

The new African assertiveness stems from new science. Even a few years ago, most developing nations viewed climate change as one

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more trouble to which they could, with sufficient aid, adapt. But after Arctic sea ice melted so dramatically in the summer of 2007, climate scientists began re-evaluating their predictions—the earth was reacting more violently than expected to even small temperature increases. It became clear that for many countries basic survival was at stake—the low-lying islands of the Maldives, though poor, have begun saving a portion of each year’s national budget to buy a new homeland if and when their current home sinks beneath the waves. Kenya’s ongoing drought, with the deaths of thousands of cattle and devastating crop failures that have accompanied it, is giving us a vivid picture of what uncontrolled climate change might bring to the African continent.

Many top scientists have realised that there’s a number that the whole world needs to know. It’s 350, as in 350 parts per million of the heat-trapping gas carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. A growing consensus among climate scientists is that it’s the most carbon we can have in the atmosphere without causing terrible climate havoc. Since we’re already past that level, at 390 parts per million, it also implies that we need much swifter political action than governments have supported in the past—it means, among other things, a serious and rapid effort to replace the burning of polluting coal with cleaner energy sources everywhere.

Normally, voices from places like Ethiopia, the Maldives and Kenya are sidelined in international forums. But this time it may be different, because a huge, positive and determined civil society movement is building around the world to support just, fair and scientific climate targets. On October 24, 350.org, an organisation that I support, will co-ordinate thousands of creative events, gatherings and rallies in almost every country in the world, to bring the number 350 to global attention.

Sharing the goals of 350.org will be internationally prominent messengers, including the Chairman of the International Panel on Climate Change, Rajendra Pachauri, and NASA’s top climate scientist, James Hansen.

Groups of people will gather in the world’s most iconic places—from Table Mountain in Cape Town to the tops of Himalayan peaks and even beneath the waves, where teams of Australian divers will be protesting on the endangered Great Barrier Reef. Across the planet Christian churches will ring their bells 350 times that day; in synagogues, Oct. 24 is the day when the story of Noah is told. Buddhist monks and Muslim congregations are joining in the same

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kind of hopeful actions. Everywhere participants will be worried about the fate of their own particular places—but they'll also be standing up for the weakest people and places on earth, whose voices simply must be heard. People in almost all the nations of the earth are involved—it's the same kind of coalition that helped make the word "apartheid" known around the world.

I ask all those around the world who care about Africa to support climate fairness on 24 October by starting or joining an awareness-raising action where they live. It's a chance for us to act as global citizens, not as isolated individuals and lonely consumers. It's a chance for world leaders to listen to voices of conscience, not to those who speak only about financial markets. In South Africa we showed that if we act on the side of justice, we have the power to turn tides; on October 24 we have a chance to start turning the tide of climate change.

ENDS

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