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Growing Clamor About Inequities of Climate Crisis

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WARSAW — Following a devastating typhoon that killed thousands in the Philippines, a routine international climate change conference here turned into an emotional forum, with developing countries demanding compensation from the worst polluting countries for damage they say they are already suffering.

Calling the climate crisis “madness,” the Philippines representative [vowed to fast](#) for the duration of the talks. Malia Talakai, a negotiator for the Alliance of Small Island States, a group that includes her tiny South Pacific homeland, Nauru, said that without urgent action to stem rising sea levels, “some of our members won’t be around.”

From the time a scientific consensus emerged that human activity was changing the climate, it has been understood that the nations that contributed least to the problem would be hurt the most. Now, even as the possible consequences of climate change have surged — from the typhoons that have raked the Philippines and India this year to the droughts in Africa, to rising sea levels that threaten to submerge entire island nations — no consensus has emerged over how to rectify what many call “climate injustice.”

Growing demands to address the issue have become an emotionally charged flash point at negotiations here at [the 19th conference](#) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which continues this week.

At a news briefing here, Farah Kabir, the director in Bangladesh for the anti-poverty organization ActionAid International, described that country as a relatively small piece of land “with a population of 160 million, trying to cope with this extreme weather, trying to cope with the effect of emissions for which we are not responsible.”

With expectations low for progress here on a treaty to replace the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, widely seen as having failed to make a dent in worldwide carbon emissions, some nations were losing

patience with decades of endless climate talks, particularly those who see rising oceans as a threat to their existence.

“We are at these climate conferences essentially moving chess figures across the board without ever being able to bring these negotiations to a conclusion,” Achim Steiner, executive director of the United Nations Environment Program, said in a telephone interview.

Although the divide between rich and poor nations has bedeviled international climate talks for two decades, the debate over how to address the disproportionate effects has steadily gained momentum. Poor nations here are pressing for a new effort that goes beyond reducing emissions and adapting to a changing climate.

While they have no legal means to seek compensation, they have demanded concrete efforts to address the “loss and damage” that the most vulnerable nations will almost certainly face — the result of fragile environments and structures, and limited resources to respond.

The sheer magnitude and complexity of the issue make such compensation unlikely. The notion of seeking justice for a global catastrophe that affects almost every country — with enormous implications for economic development — is not only immensely complicated but also politically daunting.

It assumes the culpability of the world’s most developed nations, including the United States and those in Europe, and implies a moral responsibility to bear the costs, even as those same nations seek to draft a new treaty over the next two years that would for the first time compel reductions by rapidly emerging nations like China and India. As a group, developing countries will within a decade have accounted for more than half of all historical emissions, making them responsible for a large share of the continuing impact humanity will make, if not the impact already made.

Assigning liability for specific events — like Typhoon Haiyan, which struck the Philippines with winds of at least 140 miles an hour, making it one of the strongest storms on record — is nearly impossible. It can take scientists years just to determine whether global warming contributed to the severity of a particular weather event, if it can be determined at all.

Many negotiators here have pressed to create a new mechanism that effectively accepts the idea that the results of climate change are irreversible and that the countries that are hit hardest first must be compensated.

“We’ve reached a stage where we cannot adapt anymore,” said Ronald Jumeau, the United Nations representative for the Seychelles, who is his country’s chief negotiator here. He noted the devastating effects not only of extreme storm events, but also of creeping desertification, salinization and erosion that could result in financial losses and even territorial issues that the modern world has never had to face.

“This is new,” he said. “This is like, ‘The Martians are landing!’ What do you do?”

John Kioli, the chairman of the Kenya Climate Change Working Group, a consortium of nongovernmental organizations, called climate change his country's "biggest enemy." Kenya, which straddles the Equator, faces some of the biggest challenges from rising temperatures. Arable land is disappearing and diseases like malaria are appearing in highland areas where they had never been seen before.

Developed countries, Mr. Kioli said, have a moral obligation to shoulder the cost, considering the amount of pollution they have emitted since the Industrial Revolution. "If developed countries are reasonable enough, they are able to understand that they have some responsibility," he said.

How to compensate those nations hardest hit by climate changes remains divisive, even among advocates for such action. Some have argued that wealthy countries need to create a huge pool of money to help poorer countries recover from seemingly inevitable losses of the tangible and intangible, like destroyed traditions.

Mr. Jumeau noted that Congress allocated \$60 billion just to rebuild from one storm, Hurricane Sandy, compared with the \$100 billion a year that advocates hope to see pledged to a Green Climate Fund by all nations. The fund, intended to help poorer countries reduce emissions and prepare for climate changes, has remained little more than an organizing principle since its creation in 2010, its fund-raising goals unmet.

Others have suggested a sort of insurance program.

The United States and other rich countries have made their opposition to large-scale compensation clear. Todd D. Stern, the State Department's envoy on climate issues, bluntly told a gathering at Chatham House in London last month that large-scale resources from the world's richest nations would not be forthcoming.

"The fiscal reality of the United States and other developed countries is not going to allow it," he said. "This is not just a matter of the recent financial crisis. It is structural, based on the huge obligations we face from aging populations and other pressing needs for infrastructure, education, health care and the like. We must and will strive to keep increasing our climate finance, but it is important that all of us see the world as it is."

Appeals to rectify the injustice of climate change, he added, will backfire. "Lectures about compensation, reparations and the like will produce nothing but antipathy among developed country policy makers and their publics," he said.

Juan Pablo Hoffmaister Patiño, a Bolivian who represents the alliance of developing nations known as the Group of 77 and China, said the issue was not so much about assigning culpability for the looming climate disaster as doing something to help those nations hardest hit.

"Trying to assign the blame is something that even scientifically could take us a very long time, and the challenges and problems are actually happening now," he said in an interview here. "And

we need to begin addressing them now rather than identifying who is guilty and to what degree. We can't make this issue hostage to finding the responsible ones or not."

Meanwhile, global emissions continue to rise. A report this month by the United Nations Environment Program warned that immediate action must be taken to reduce emissions enough to limit the rise in average global temperatures to 2 degrees Celsius, or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, above preindustrial levels. That is the maximum warming that many scientists believe can occur without causing potentially catastrophic climate change.

The current global turbulence, consistent with what scientists expect to happen as the climate changes, is already taking a toll.

As the hundreds of diplomats and advocates assembled for talks here, Justus Lavi was waiting for rain in Kenya. The wheat, beans and potatoes he planted on his farm in Makueni County sprouted, but the rainy season brought only two days of showers, threatening to ruin his yield.

In northern Somalia, Nimcaan Farah Abdi's 10 acres of corn, tomatoes and other vegetables were ruined as violent storms swept the Horn of Africa. A typhoon last weekend in nearby Puntland killed more than 100 people, a disaster overshadowed by the far more destructive one in the Philippines.

"My farm has been washed away," Mr. Abdi said. It was the second year in a row of unusually heavy storms to have destroyed his livelihood, leaving him uncertain about how he will provide for his six children. "God knows," he added, "but I don't have anything to give now."

Steven Lee Myers reported from Warsaw, and Nicholas Kulish from Nairobi, Kenya. Justin Gillis contributed reporting from New York, David Jolly from Paris, and Mohammed Ibrahim from Mogadishu, Somalia.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 17, 2013

An earlier version of this article misstated the relative area of Bangladesh and Denmark. Bangladesh is roughly three times the area of Denmark, according to The World Factbook published by the Central Intelligence Agency, not, as Farah Kabir, the director in Bangladesh for the anti-poverty organization ActionAid International said in a news briefing, "a piece of land that is smaller than Denmark."