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Delays at the Bella Center in Copenhagen and other matters

Sean McDonagh | Dec. 15, 2009 NCR Today

Irish Columban Fr. Sean McDonagh sent this report from the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen on Tuesday, Dec. 15:

"During the first week of the U. N. climate change conference here in Copenhagen, it took about 10 to 15 minutes to clear security and enter the Bella Center where the conference is being held. The only exception was the first day, on Dec. 7, when chaos reigned.

Things deteriorated on Monday, Dec. 14. It was obvious during the final days of week one, that many more people had turned up for the conference than the authorities had planned for. During the weekend, the conference president, Connie Hedegaard, let it be known that there would be serious reductions on members from civil society entering the building during the second week. The way they decided to cut numbers was to demand a second card as a condition of entering the Bella Center. The chairs of the various sponsoring bodies spent the weekend trying to secure these new cards. As I am registered under Franciscans International, our chair, Sr. Odile Coirer, arranged to meet with us at the documentation desk at 11 o?clock on Monday morning.

When we arrived at the Bella Center we saw, to our dismay, a long winding queue about 200 meters long. It took over an hour to get through security. Standing in the queue one heard a lot of grumbling and complaints about how the Danish authorities had not prepared adequately for this conference and when problems arose, the first groups to be affected were those from civil society, the NGOs. A growing police and military presence was also discernible and stories were circulating about tear gas attacks on demonstrators the previous evening.

My experience in the Philippines helped me cope with the long queue. During my first year in the Philippines in 1969, I found bus breakdowns or long delays in waiting for boats, planes or buses very annoying. When I complained one evening in central house in Ozamiz ? Katadman, - an older Columban advised me that when I was travelling I should always bring with me a novel, possible a serious book and a writing pad. I did and it changed my perceptions radically.

Things have moved on technologically since then, so yesterday morning while standing in the queue I found myself listening to a lecture on tape given by John Feehan. The theme of his talk was the extraordinary architectural structure of the flower called enchanter nightshade.

I was lucky to make it on time to Bella Center on Monday morning where Sr. Olide was waiting. She had received only 7 new cards, so she decided to allot one to each congregation represented on the Franciscans International team. That is how I secured my card.

The main talking point at noon yesterday was the annoyance of the African group at the possibility that the Kyoto process was being bypassed here at Copenhagen. Victor Fodeke, the environment minister for Mali, said that what had begun as a ?train of hope? was in danger of crashing abruptly. He said that the suggestion by the conference president Connie Hedegaard, that the plenary session should discuss ?unresolved issues of long-term cooperative action? under the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), without mentioning

the Kyoto Protocol was an attempt to sideline the Kyoto Protocol.

The reality is that the Kyoto Protocol is still the only legally binding treaty regulating greenhouse gas emissions. It is due to expire in 2012. If it expires without a following-up treaty it could take years to negotiate a new deal. The scientists are telling us we do not have the luxury of time.

I attended a scientific presentation by the Hadley Centre (Met Office) in Britain. They are convinced that climate change is happening and poses a considerable challenge to life on earth as we know it. We need to begin reducing carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere by 2016.

A frantic round of informal consultations was held to mend fences. As a result, Ms. Hedegaard?s agenda items was amended to include the rider that the Kyoto Protocol process is still very much on the table.

My editor in Hong Kong, Jim Mulroney always replies whenever I send him an article. During this week he has often suggested that I enjoy myself also while I am here in Copenhagen. Since Jim is well-known in Columban circles for the rigors of his ascetic life, I felt obliged to follow his brotherly admonition.

So at 6 pm yesterday I set out for the Irish Embassy where the Ambassador, Joe Hayes greeted Irish participants at the U. N conference. I arrived early and had a good conversation with Joe. Many Columbans in the Philippines will remember him from the late 1980s, when he was Irish ambassador to both to China and the Philippines. He has many fond memories of meeting with Columbans, especially on a Monday evening at our central house in Manila on Singalong Street. He mentioned that he once went to visit the British ambassador in Manila to ask his assessment of the situation in the Philippines, since he was living in Beijing. The British ambassador told him that the best place to get a handle on what was happening in the Philippines was to visit Singalong on a Monday night. ?You will find people from all over the Philippines and they have their ears to the ground.?

There was quite a motley bunch at the party. I met with Prof. John Sweeney who worked with me on the Irish bishops? pastoral reflection on climate change. He was frozen, as he had to wait 8 hours in a queue earlier in the day in freezing conditions in order to register. Even then, the office closed down before he could clinch the deal. Before leaving both the ambassador and the Irish minister for the environment, John Gormley spoke about their hopes for a successful treaty here in Copenhagen. At about 9.30 pm I left the party and returned to the Franciscan house in Roskilde about 40 minutes by train from Copenhagen.

On Tuesday afternoon the various Irish groups represented here in Copenhagen are meeting with the Irish minister for the environment to lobby him on their various concerns. As a missionary I will be raising questions about the Adaptation Fund. This needs to be massively financially upscaled, and the money must not taken out of the Oversea Development Aid (ODA) budgets. Finance needs to be arranged to help countries draw up a full range of Adaptation strategies and actions for economically poor countries. There is also a need to prioritize particularly vulnerable countries and peoples and we need to help them to begin to get access to the Adaptation Fund. For Columbans that would include, Pakistan, Peru, Chile, the Philippines and Fiji. At this point in the negotiations there are no firm figures on the table in regard to the Adaptation Fund."

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