

we've got male

A Clock Ticking

Bilicki

by Renato Redentor Constantino



In Plain Speak. The UN climate talks have been derailed by the constant evasion of historical responsibilities and drive to create money out of climate change. As these talks are further muddled even by technical languages, chances of reversing climate change become slimmer.

Illustration taken from Climateprogress.org

When Elvie Baladad lashed out at the United Nations (UN)-sponsored climate proceedings in Bangkok, Thailand last October 2009, she was not kidding. She was livid and she had every right to be furious.

Representing a Philippine sector that has been reeling from the impacts of climate change rural women, Baladad spoke angrily to a crowd of women who had gathered at the entrance of the UN's headquarters in Thailand: "The only thing more insane than the weather are the officials negotiating our future inside the UN building."¹

Her accusation was harsh but it was unassailable.

Confronted by a crisis that threatens enduring if not irreversible harm to the ability of human life to thrive with the rest of the planet, representatives of the largest greenhouse gas emitting countries opted instead to parley blithely, as if the task

expected of them was to merely watch a fruit ripen on a branch.

“We are all chiseling away at the various pieces of the document to build a structure, but we don’t know what kind of structure we are building,” said one delegate during the Bangkok negotiations.² “We talked about whether we are trying to build townhouses or a tower and about two elephants and how

the affluent. But their task was different. They were expected to make tough but absolutely necessary decisions, which made their wringing and empty posturing beyond appalling.

We live today in an era of great trepidation, brought about by the greatest threat ever confronted by human life as we know it. Climate change is upon us, but its most terrible impacts can still be stopped even reversed, if only decision makers faced the crisis with commensurate urgency today.

If they were merely arguing about the merits of shaving razors and big cars, it would be understandable. After all, most represented the affluent. But their task was different.

The answers needed to avert warming temperatures worldwide from passing into the realm of peril are not unknown. In fact, most solutions are already commercially viable and readily available.

Studies after studies have demonstrated that steep reductions in emissions are possible through a combination of pragmatic, immediate and strategic measures in the world’s economies, including even those that have inflicted miniscule injury to the planet’s climate.⁵

one would react if her elephant died,” said another in the corridors of the UN³ “We also discussed mixing all the ingredients together so they are cooked before Copenhagen,” where the penultimate international concurrence or collapse is expected.⁴ And the men spoke in the conference halls because largely, yes, they were men about the noble need to balance the present’s priorities with the hopes of tomorrow, as if they were not staring at the annihilation of all possibilities of future human well-being. As if they were debating the techniques of dying out slowly on a mass scale, but with all commas and hyphens and semi-colons given their due place in the suicide text they were negotiating.

A shift away from fossil fuels and nuclear power towards sustainable, renewable energy, harnessing the power of the wind, the sun, moving water, biomass and geothermal energy.

A shift towards more efficient, smart energy utilisation.

A shift towards energy planning, towards decentralised energy systems.

A realisable revolution in the way energy is produced and used, including the rapid and broad deployment of pedestrian-friendly, working class-biased transport systems.⁶

In a large sense, it was yet again a naked display of the weaknesses and perceived strengths of men. There was a big talk about the household in crisis while avoiding real work needed by home and hearth.

Food production at home for domestic consumption.

A shift away from highly polluting, greenhouse gas-intensive industrial production.

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The basics. Just basics. Nothing more but nothing less.



Still the Same Dirty Coal.

Clean coal is aggressively marketed as clean energy. Yet clean coal hardly improves the already poor thermal efficiency rating of the usual coal power plants. Moreover, it does not keep notorious gases from entering the atmosphere.

Illustration by Khalil Bendib taken from Corpwatch.org

But no. Instead of embracing choices that are ready for deployment, delusion continues to enjoy the welcoming ears of government leaders and industry titans while the rest of us follow quietly as we ignore the responsibility of citizenship and enjoy the boons of consumerism.

“Fish for lunch?” the oceanographer Gerd Leipold once asked. “Let’s empty the whole sea. Chair to sit on? Let’s fell the Amazon. Breathing space for the four wheel drive? Let’s fill up the sky with CO2. The market system is ingenious,” said Leipold in 2002. “It has an answer to everything. But it is environmentally stupid.”⁷

In response to the humongous spike in carbon dioxide emissions brought about mainly by the spread of coal-fired power plants, governments and institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) connive and propose to build even more “clean coal” power stations packaged as climate solutions bearing labels such “Mega” and “Ultramega” coal plants with “supercritical” or “ultrasupercritical” boiler equipment.

If you think these tags sound too much like opponents of Ironman or the Incredible Hulk, you may not be too far from the truth of today’s fantasies. Because fantasies are what these so-called “climate solutions” are.

It is the world of Man until we change it. The plague of carbon monstrosities proposed today will see the light of day unless opposition is exercised from the outset, because in the end, in such a world, only size and power will matter.

The purveyors of the most polluting technologies will tell us that the wares they push represent the most cutting edge “clean coal” facilities ever. They will regale you with terms, as if they were listing the weapons of Voltes V or Dragonball Z. Unfortunately the term “clean coal” is pure boyhood fantasy.

Electrostatic precipitators, flue gas desulfurizers all sorts of end-of-pipe tools sound intimidatingly nifty yet they can only reduce but not eliminate nitrous oxide emissions and sulfur dioxide. They cannot touch the deadly neurotoxin mercury nor carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas that is largely responsible for global warming.

Despite all the decades spent on research and development, the most advanced “clean coal” power plants can only accomplish today at best up to 50 per cent thermal efficiency. This means that half the blight still goes out the smokestack. And if any of the coal plants try to employ that other fantasy called “carbon capture” or “carbon sequestration,” the efficiency of the power station plunges, which means that more coal will have to be burned to produce a similar amount of energy.⁸

Today the proposal is to move towards the single most expensive and dangerous option ever invented by man to boil water nuclear energy.⁹

Another proposal is to adopt a wide array of supposed Plan Bs, which fall under the category called geoengineering, a growing field of rank machismo where big is better and bigger is best. Never mind if none of the

Plan Bs address the causes of climate change.¹⁰ The technofixes are humongous, requiring bazillions of dollars.

Ever heard of ocean fertilisation, “where iron dust is dumped into the ocean to trigger algal blooms” that will supposedly absorb carbon dioxide and then harmlessly fall to the ocean floor (never mind the ecosystems that will suffocate) once the great mass of algae is sated?¹¹

Ever heard of the plan to install space-based sun shields to block the sun’s rays? This proposal involves launching millions of mirrors into orbit between the sun and the Earth.¹²

What about the plan to cover swaths of ocean and desert with white plastic in order to reflect back solar waves?¹³ What about the proposal to spray humongous amounts of seawater “hundreds of meters into the air to seed the formation of stratocumulus clouds over the subtropical ocean”?

Assuming the trick actually works an incredible assumption and the new cloud formations actually bounce back the sun’s radiation, everyone will then go on emitting and emitting and emitting. Which means we commit the earth with the spray option to a point of no return. The moment the water spouting stops and there are legions of technological, societal and political reasons

that can potentially disrupt the process it can trigger rapid climate warming, that would then create an even greater impact “on society and ecosystems than gradual global warming.”¹⁴

As Rutgers University scientist Alan Robock attested recently in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, there are schemes being pushed today in the UN, calling for funding to be channelled towards technologies that seek to control the planet’s thermostat. Even if we disregard the environmental effects of these measures and political leaders actually mobilise “public support and funding to implement it, how would the world agree on the optimal climate? What if Russia wants it a couple of degrees warmer, and India a couple of degrees cooler?” Is it possible “to tailor the climate of each region of the planet independently without affecting the others? If we proceed with geoengineering, will we provoke future climate wars?”¹⁵

The target to remain within safe boundaries prescribed by science is well-known—an agreed world treaty strong enough to bring carbon dioxide levels down to 350 parts per million (ppm) in the atmosphere.¹⁶ Scientists have told us that we are already above the safe zone at 390ppm and that unless we are able to rapidly return to 350 ppm this century, we risk reaching tipping points and irreversible impacts such as the melting of the Greenland ice sheet and major methane releases from increased permafrost melt.”¹⁷

What we need today is climate leadership concerted, decisive action to force governments to act in recognition not just of the severity of the climate crisis but also of the terrible injustice that the avarice of a few has perpetrated. Because those who have done little to create the problem and who have the least means to cope with the impacts of global warming are the ones who will bear the consequences of

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Bottomline. *With the patriarchal politics and corporate solutions that dominate the current climate talks, Southern communities especially women and girls brace an even more uncertain future.*

Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

the colonisation of the atmosphere by elites from both rich and poor countries.

Unless action is taken, the most vulnerable among communities and let us name them, for they are our

daughters and nieces, sisters, mothers and aunts — they will bear the cross of today's cowardice for today's sense of play amidst impending catastrophe.

There is a tiny passage by the jingoist poet Rudyard Kipling which deserves an elevated place in the history of men. A mere smattering of words, it demonstrates the immense tragedy of the masculine enterprise, a perpetually doomed world of feverish commerce, control and chest thumpers. Kipling wrote it in the context of the First

World War, when he persuaded his only son John to enlist. Kipling's son died on his first day of combat. The British writer would later pen these words:

"If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied."¹⁸

Regret came only after the fact of calamity and only when it was already the poet's own.

How long can we wait? And are we really, completely aware of what awaits us if we let others decide our fate?

There is very little time left and the clock is ticking. ■

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Endnotes

- ¹ Renato Redentor Constantino, (23 October 2009), "Writing History's Longest Suicide Note," URL: <http://blogs.gmanews.tv/red-constantino/index.php?/archives/9-Writing-historys-longest-suicide-note.html>
- ² Earth Negotiations Bulletin, AWGs #4, (1 October 2009), Vol. 12, No. 431.
- ³ Earth Negotiations Bulletin, AWGs #4, (1 October 2009), Vol. 12, No. 431.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ For a regional survey of alternative power scenarios written by leading institutes and experts in the energy industry, see <<http://www.energyblueprint.info/>>
- ⁶ To get an idea of an innovative Philippine climate-friendly cities program, see the website of the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities <<http://ejepney.org>>
- ⁷ Speech delivered by Gerd Leipold, then Greenpeace International executive director at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, 2002.
- ⁸ Op. Cit. 5
- ⁹ Stephen Thomas et. al. (5 December 2007). "The Economics of Nuclear Power." URL: <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/press/reports/the-economics-of-nuclear-power>
- ¹⁰ Alan Robock, (2008), "20 reasons why geoengineering may be a bad idea," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Vol. 64, No.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid. See also the website of the geoengineering monitor, ETC Group, etcgroup.org/en/issues/geoengineering
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ See <http://350.org>
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ From William Blum (4 November 2009), The Anti-Empire Report. URL: <http://killingbope.org/bblum6/aer75.html>