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Press Conference

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PRESS CONFERENCE BY CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS ON HIGH-LEVEL CLIMATE CHANGE SUMMIT

The wait-and-see attitude adopted by many countries with regard to action to address climate change was putting the process at risk and making it less and less easy to ensure a fair and just climate treaty offering something to the world, especially the poorest parts, René Grotenhuis, President of the CIDSE Network of Catholic Development Agencies, said today at Headquarters.

Too many countries were still holding their cards close to their chest and waiting and to see what others were doing before committing themselves to climate change efforts, Mr. Grotenhuis said at a press conference by CIDSE and the Caritas Internationalis delegation to the high-level Climate Change Summit, which was organized by the Permanent Mission of the Netherlands to the United Nations.

Accompanied by Elizabeth Peredo, Director of Fundación Solon of Bolivia, and Cardinal Keith O'Brien, Archbishop of Saint Andrews and Edinburgh in Scotland, he said that, as a result, there was a lot of talk about 2020 and 2050 as the target year, whereas immediate action was needed. Many people in Africa and across the world were suffering the effects of climate change, as droughts and unpredictable rain patterns affected livelihoods and put their survival at risk.

Emphasizing the importance of coming up with a clear-cut message in Copenhagen that the poorest had been taken into account, he said CIDSE had engaged in the climate change campaign on the basis of its experience working on poverty and realizing that climate change really affected poor people most, even though they were the least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions. As a Catholic organization, CIDSE believed deeply that the Earth was a creation of God handed over to humans and, as such, people must be responsible stewards in caring for it.

He said the presence of Caritas and CIDSE representatives at the Summit was aimed at giving the discussions a human face by showing that beyond industry politics, energy politics and the economic crisis, climate change was affecting people. Behind the figures and "power wrestling" of the big actors, human faces were most afflicted, and world leaders must show up in Copenhagen to give the Conference the political momentum needed to forge a good treaty.

Cardinal O'Brien added that his experiences had motivated his involvement in trying to do something about climate change, and called for efforts to spread awareness of the issue. In his discussions at the current Summit, he had found that delegates were all fully aware of the risk to the planet, but at home they were still dragging their feet and had been slow to respond. It was one of his responsibilities as a church leader to stimulate, upon returning home, the people under his care to realize what was happening with regard to climate change.

In response to a question, he said there was no conflict between Catholic beliefs and efforts to address climate change, pointing out that the Pope had spoken out about the necessity of being aware of what was happening to the world. There was talk of the Pontiff working on an encyclical on the subject in the not-too-distant future.

Ms. Peredo said that the city of La Paz, where she was born, had been blessed with glaciers that were now melting, though Bolivia contributed less than 0.1 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, while suffering the worst consequences of global warming. Many people were suffering because the fields had been affected and seeds were dying. Drought afflicted some areas and malaria had been reported in communities as high as 3,000 metres above sea level.

The climate crisis was the tragic symptom of a global economic system based on profit, over-production and over-consumption, she continued. Climate change was not just an environmental issue, but first and foremost a matter of justice, development, equity and honour. It was unfair that developing countries and poor people paid the consequences of a problem created by rich countries. People in developing countries were already adapting to the changing climate, but the rich countries must also adapt, not only in their survival methods, but also by modifying their lifestyles.

While human rights remained important, it was also necessary to honour the relationship between humans and “Mother Earth”, she said. That was why the international community was being urged to produce a declaration that could retrieve the rights of Mother Earth. In that regard, it had been suggested that a seat be symbolically reserved for Mother Earth in the General Assembly.

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