



Climate Change and the Muslim World: The OIC Can do with ‘Captain Planet’

*Sofiah Jamil**

14 February 2007

WHILE the media incessantly highlights the Muslim world’s battle with Islamophobia and the political crises in Iraq, Gaza and Iran, another set of issues that is just as pertinent -- but often overlooked -- is climate change. According to the World Meteorological Organisation, 90% of the global disasters that occurred between 1993 and 2002 were weather, climate or water-related. Recent reports by Sir Nicholas Stern and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) highlighted the immense adversities that climate change has, and could have, on the environment and economic development.

Many countries affected by climate change are also members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), an international organisation of predominantly Muslim states. Environmental degradation has the potential to retard the OIC’s efforts at alleviating poverty and promoting progress in the Muslim world. Moreover, stalled economic development may feed into despair and instability in the Muslim world, which in turn may exacerbate the current political crises mentioned earlier.

The record thus far

The Stern Review notes that developing countries would suffer the brunt of climate change’s wrath. Climate change has caused an increase in unpredictable extreme weather conditions. The OIC has much to be alarmed by this, given that nearly all of its members are developing countries and 40 out of its 57 members have experienced a climate-related disaster *at least* once. According to United Nations statistics, OIC members have in the past five years, experienced at least: -

- 32 floods;
- 11 flash floods;
- 6 typhoons;
- 5 cold waves;
- 4 droughts;
- 3 tornados; and
- 3 snow avalanches.

The unpredictable weather conditions have also contributed to increased breeding of desert locusts resulting in locust attacks on food crops, the worst being in 2004, which threatened the food security of 24 countries in the Middle East and the North African region, most of whom were OIC members.

Such disasters continue to cause a great deal of damage to developing countries’ fragile infrastructure that sustains economic well being and, more importantly, its food and energy

resources. Experts predict that rising sea levels would destroy about 30% of Africa's coastal infrastructure, parts of which are found in nine OIC member states although they, ironically, contributed little to climate change.

The critical issue at hand is that many of these countries lack the capacity to deal with the effects of climate change. This is discounting other disasters, which can retard OIC members' economic development and growth. Many OIC members have yet to fully recover from fatal earthquakes and their consequences (such as in Pakistan in 2005), tsunamis (in Indonesia) and the spread of preventable diseases – cholera and malnutrition – spawned by the lack of medical facilities, clean water and proper sanitation.

Climate change can also aggravate these crises. Extreme weather conditions such as heavy rainfall exacerbate landslides and retard relief operations thus causing further suffering and despair for victims. Moreover, rising global temperatures facilitate the spread of infectious diseases like dengue fever and bird flu. Five out of the 10 countries with human-infected cases of bird flu are OIC members.

What's the OIC (not) doing about Climate Change?

Much of the international community has agreed that climate change must be addressed immediately. The need to lower carbon emissions and increasing the use of renewable energy has been a top priority for the European Union. Although the main carbon emitters, China and the US, refuse to put a cap on their carbon emissions, others are attempting to make clean technology more accessible for economic development. The Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (APP), for instance, aims to work in tandem with the UNFCCC's initiatives. The East Asia Summit has recently also agreed to intensify energy conservation efforts by diversifying their energy sources. Although the extent to which these initiatives will actually materialise is disputable, the gravity of the issue is at least being acknowledged and addressed.

On the other hand, the OIC -- which represents one-fifth of the world's population and many of whose members are direct victims of climate change -- has not directly acted on the issue. It has, however, identified two vital elements that need to be tackled – poverty alleviation and increasing the wealth of knowledge. These elements are highlighted in the OIC's Ten Year programme – part of its “Enlightened Moderation” agenda launched in 2005. Still, progress has been slow. The creation of a fund to assist the less developed members, in which OIC members are to contribute 0.02% of their GDP, is likely to remain a rhetoric as most members stagger to pay their membership dues, what more contribute to the fund. Moreover, there is no mention of climate change in the Ten Year Programme; current discussions on climate change in the OIC are rather low-key.

The international community has agreed that the wealthier developed countries should take the lead in stemming climate change. Even so, efforts by wealthier Muslim states are imbalanced with many of them doing very little and not acknowledging the urgency of the issue. Saudi Arabia, who holds most of the purse strings of the OIC, has long been a sceptic of climate change. Moreover, many OIC states set aside a relatively minimal amount of their GDP on education, health and science compared to military armament. According to UN statistics, six out of the top ten military spenders in the world are OIC states - Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria and Oman, with more than 7% of their GDP channelled into military expenditure. Moreover, only an average of 0.34% is spent on research and development by OIC members while the world average is 2.36%.

Much as their military expenditures are understandable given the security situation in the Middle East, there is a need to rethink their priorities. This is especially so for those Muslim

states blessed with abundant natural resources. The prosperous oil-generated economies must diversify and invest in clean technology so as to advocate and support environmentally friendly growth in other OIC member states.

German scientists have suggested that generating solar power from the vast Arabian deserts would provide a great source of alternative energy. Efforts of countries like Pakistan and Malaysia towards alternative energy are commendable and suggest that there is vast wealth of environmental knowledge in the Muslim world. What is needed now is to effectively utilize this wealth of knowledge. Rich gulf Arab states can no longer be complacent and turn a deaf ear to experts inside as well as outside the Muslim world regarding climate change.

The OIC must officially acknowledge the gravity of climate change's consequences on its member states. By engaging in initiatives similar to those done by other international organisations, the OIC would increase its credibility as a body with influence on the world stage. If nothing substantial is done soon by key OIC member states, the prospects of an overall prosperous, cleaner and safer world will be as bleak as realistically summoning Captain Planet.

* *Sofiah Jamil is a Research Analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University and attached to the Consortium on Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia (NTS-Asia).*