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Let's Get Serious About Climate Talks

By MIKHAIL GORBACHEV

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I spent the entire month of August in Moscow. Those who were in the Russian capital then will never forget the heavy smog from wildfires in nearby regions that choked the city for weeks. The city seemed immersed in an alternate reality. People, plants, animals — all bore the imprint of suffering, frustration and fear.

Until quite recently, many in Russia, including members of the ruling elite, spoke skeptically about global warming, with a disdain for scientific data. Today their numbers have shrunk.

Of course, this weather-related anomaly was just one among many this year. Mudslides in China, unprecedented droughts in Australia and India, floods in Pakistan and Central Europe; the list goes on. The year 2010 is well on its way to becoming the warmest on record. News of a huge chunk of ice, about twice the size of Paris, breaking away from a Greenland glacier in August came as a menacing symbol of global warming.

Yet, paradoxically, despite the increasingly clear and growing danger of climate change, the pace of negotiations and actions to counteract it has slowed. The public, meanwhile, is frustrated about the ability of governments to effectively address the problem. This could bring us perilously close to public disengagement and apathy.

What has happened? Why all this backsliding in the year that followed the much anticipated United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen?

The reasons lie in the failure of political leadership and lack of will among those who have bowed to vested interests, as well as in governments' inability to strike compromises that meet the often diverging interests of economic and political players.

The Copenhagen conference did not live up to expectations. The considerable divide between developed and developing nations stood in the way of the main, ambitious goal of a global climate deal.

Instead of analyzing the reasons behind this disappointment in all their complexity, and encouraging a search for realistic, constructive solutions, the media rushed to label the conference an abject failure.

"Climategate," a carefully engineered scandal that took quotations from climate scientists' e-mails out of context, and a campaign to discredit the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change also did much to mislead people.

The corporate lobbies that organize climate-change-denial campaigns are lavishly financed, outspending those supporting urgent action by 7 to 1. One result is the \$550 billion a year in subsidies that the International Energy Agency estimates go to the fossil fuel sector of the energy industry. True, the Group of 20 economic powers recently announced a phasing out of such subsidies — but "in the medium term."

Everyone seems to understand that the climate problem cannot be wished away. Negotiations on how to fight climate change continue. After the latest round of talks in China, the U.N. process will resume in Cancún, Mexico, in a few weeks. Participants, however, seem more anxious about "lowering expectations" than about achieving the first tangible results. Diplomats and experts are stuck on technical issues, and voices are already being heard in favor of settling for the lowest common denominator or even reformatting the process, with the hope that the business community might come up with purely technocratic solutions to climate change.

This is not the way to go forward. Although business — with its ability to adapt new technologies and make a profit by doing so — could of course play a major role in the transition to a low carbon economy, it would be naïve to expect it to be the primary driver of this process.

The business community will always look out for its own interests and short-term profits. As for the theory that “the free market” will solve every problem, few find that idea convincing after its proponents brought the world economy to the brink of disaster.

Equally unacceptable are suggestions that the fight against climate chaos should be left largely to the most “advanced” nations. This would not only infringe on the role of the U.N., but it risks widening the gap between developed and developing countries.

Clearly, as countries like China increase their economic power they must assume greater responsibility for the environment. We need to persuade them that it is in their own best interests to do so. Furthermore, we need a strong and meaningful effort to create incentives for them to adopt energy-efficient and alternative fuel technologies, as well as to stimulate those who are ready to transfer such technologies to emerging countries. Agreements on all these issues can only be hammered out within the framework of a multilateral process under U.N. auspices. Cancún offers another chance to re-energize the process.

So, despite the fact that 2010 has been a mostly disappointing year for those who advocate urgent action to save our planet, we cannot afford presumptions of failure or pessimism. There are enough people in civil society who have not succumbed to defeatism and are ready to act to make governments listen. The global self-preservation instinct must finally force world leaders to resume serious negotiations with ambitious goals.

Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 until its dissolution in 1991, is a founder and board member of Green Cross International.