

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JHM-2
Linking Up in Penang

Kuching, Sarawak
East Malaysia
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Dear Peter,

Sunderlal Bahaguna turns slowly to his audience and demands in a quiet sing-song, "What do the forests bear?" Narrating the history of India's Chipko ("Tree Hugging") movement, he answers, "Soil, water, and pure air, which are the basis of life." In his Gandhian homespun tunic and headcloth, he addresses the gathering of close to 200 environmental and consumer activists, assembled in Penang, Malaysia from over 28 countries in early April.

In much of Asia and the Pacific region, forest conservation is not a middle-class, liberal issue, but a matter of basic survival. For most of the popular environmental movements spreading in Asia, forests, land, and water are not "natural resources" to be effectively managed to maximize commodity production, but equal partners with humanity in life on earth.

International conferences are relatively new turf for environmental, consumer, and indigenous peoples' activists often labelled as extremists in their own countries. This one, on "Global Development and Environment Crisis," was a multicultural event as much as a collection of papers and presentations. Convened by Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth, Malaysia) and the Asia-Pacific Peoples' Environmental Network, the conference was intended to set up and reinforce connections between groups working on broadly defined sets of environmental issues, and to point out links between seemingly local, isolated conditions and global political and economic structures.

I guessed that this conference would not be the usual collection of international experts on "development issues" as participants straggled into the dining room of Penang's RECSAM conference center the night before planned activities began. Instead of the usual conference portfolios, many of us carried the finely-woven rattan backpacks in which conference programs had been distributed. They were made by members of the nomadic Penan people in the interior jungles of Sarawak. I noted the high proportion of women, and absence

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of the bush jackets that are standard attire in Southeast Asian officialdom. Tee-shirts bearing slogans like "Perak Anti-Nuclear Committee" and "Save the Rainforest" mixed with flowing "baju kurong," the traditional Malay women's garb making a come-back with popular Islam. A lively exchange in pamphlets and buttons was under way. The kitchen ran out of vegetarian meals early, as conference planners had underestimated the number of non-meat-eaters.

We were prepared to discuss topics ranging from deforestation and watershed destruction in India and Malaysia to nuclear testing in the South Pacific and the potential impact of genetic engineering on the livelihood of third world farmers. My initial queeziness on the broad range of conference topics was largely dispelled by an emerging consensus that bound these issues together: "Development" must be redefined. Meaningful development must depend on protecting diverse natural and cultural environments under local community control.

In this selective account of the meeting, I am deliberately highlighting issues that may not come up again in my future ICWA newsletters. While about a quarter of the 45 formal presentations addressed the politics of forest conservation, threats to biological diversity, and the rights of indigenous peoples, I expect these topics to be the subjects of future newsletters. At this meeting, I was fascinated by the perspective of Westerners talking about industrial nations' impact on Asia and the Pacific. I was also impressed by the work of women in the groups represented.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia is a highly respectable organization. Halimaton Ibrahim, in baju kurong and veil, opened conference proceedings the next day in Bahasa Malaysia and English. She introduced Mohammed Idris, charismatic President of Sahabat Alam and coordinator of the Asia-Pacific Peoples' Environment Network. Idris probed the depth of the world's environmental crises. Tropical deforestation was compared to acid rain. Toxic water pollution in Europe and North America was linked with chemical dumping in Asia, with the recent Sandoz Rhine accident as focus. The confusion, secrecy, and excesses of Bhopal were compared by implication with similar patterns worldwide in nuclear power and arms production. Idris recited a list of plagues, asking if the price of modern technology, in the form of a "high tech holocaust," is not too high for the world to pay. He then introduced a representative of Datuk Stephen Yong, Malaysia's Minister of Science, Technology, and the Environment. (Yong himself was on the program, but was unable to come in the midst of national election campaigns and the wind-up of State elections in his native Sarawak.) Ironic, following Idris' declaration of pessimism in environmental legislation in the face of overwhelming commercial interest in the abuse of natural resources, the Minister's representative continued the list of international environmental ills. He called for the usual solutions: environmental impact statements and planning, environmental and project monitoring, education and training... And the need for a global change of heart.

The warning that "we can't go on this way" was continued in an eloquent statement by Martin Khor, of the Consumers Association of Penang and the Third World Network. Echoing the North-South debates of the 1970s, Khor pointed out the connection between environmental exploitation and social impoverishment, and the extent to which the third world is exporting its environmental capital. Nicholas Hildyard (editor of *The Ecologist*, a British Environmental journal) set the tone for many of the European presentations. He illustrated an insidious cycle of reckless natural resource exploitation, insatiable hunger for consumer goods and energy, international development aid, and foreign debt. Acceptance of production-maximizing capitalist (or state-capitalist) development models inevitably leads to new forms of environmental degradation and the displacement of indigenous peoples. Quite a package for the first two hours!

By the coffee break, many of the conference participants joked through the morning's shell-shocks, wary of neocolonial environmental exploiters lurking under the refreshment table. Eyeing the Malaysian press corps, who had turned out conspicuously, some of us wondered why we had come so far to hear a hopeless recitation of doom. Inspiration was to come later. This group was out to save the world, or at least to exchange clues on how to go about trying. With such a beginning, I was surprised at the optimism and positiveness of presentations over the next four days. The most interesting of them linked key factors in breaking cycles of environmental degradation, economic dependency, loss of local control of land, water, and production, and militarization. I was also surprised at the basic agreement among participants on the definition of these terms, although the standard concept of "third world" came under attack.

Several presentations highlighted the need for extreme care in choosing technologies for future use, in all sectors of all economies, for food and energy production and all extractive industries. Any technology having the side-effect of reducing local control of land by people living on the land was an obvious villain. Highest on the list were large dam projects that displace population, almost inevitably "tribal" or indigenous people with little power to affect decisions spelling the life or death of their communities. Geraldine Fiagoy, of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance in the Philippines, spoke of the history of opposition to the Chico River Dam. Community organizations initially formed to oppose confiscation of land and massive population dislocation (to accommodate dam construction and reservoirs) have

moved on to carry out alternative development programs. Branded as subversive revolutionaries by the Marcos regime and brutally suppressed, many of the surviving local organizations have cooperated to protect local rights under the Philippines' new constitution and organize small irrigation and agro-forestry projects, cooperatives, literacy and health care projects. Fiagoy described the Aquino government's initial sympathy with the Cordillera movement, and its more recent backing-off. Now, however, there is a possibility of demanding some local rights and autonomy without being pushed underground or into violent opposition.

Several participants, most notably Jayanto Bandyopadhyaya of India's Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy, pointed out the ironic diversion of resources inherent in many of the large-scale irrigation projects funded by international loans. Loan repayment schedules often raise the cost of such projects to the point where they can only be justified by increased production of cash crops -- often for export -- to generate currency for loan repayment. As irrigated farming replaces dryland techniques, waterlogging of irrigated land is often accompanied by increased vulnerability to drought, as upland water catchment areas may be eliminated over time and natural drainage patterns are often affected by diversions to large irrigation dams in the first place.

Such discussions returned to the mainstream of recent development and natural resource management thinking, where large-scale projects aimed at rural development have become increasingly suspect. Characteristic of many of the presentations by Western participants, Patricia Adams' and Larry Solomons' investigations of international aid for energy "mega-projects" (most notably large dams and hydroelectricity works) found that the ecological and social equity problems that such projects have run into in North America and Europe are compounded when international aid institutions are brought into the picture.

Adams and Solomons, both of Canada's Energy Probe, presented somewhat different solutions to the problem, however. Adams demanded that international aid institutions be made vastly more accountable to the public in countries where projects are being planned and in donor nations. She called for specific measures to eliminate the secrecy of aid institutions' project feasibility studies, planning, and environmental impact assessments, opening the entire process to public input and debate. Solomons' answer was a typically North American one -- rely on the profit motive. If energy projects are run as regulated businesses, uneconomic projects, including most nuclear power plants, would fall by the wayside. He provided examples of business' recent rejection of new investment in nuclear power, while many governments (less subject to profit and loss considerations) continue to support them.

While Adams' argument was largely accepted, Solomon's was greeted coolly by many of the Asian participants, who mumbled that Bhopal victims had still received no compensation from Union Carbide, so how could energy businesses be forced to assume liability for their actions in the third world, much less governments? Even colder to market arguments were many of the Western European participants, largely representing Green political and direct action groups.

A series of talks on new technologies warned of danger to consumers and the environment due to corporate secrecy in research and development, matched by naiveté, bungling, and corruption in the government agencies charged regulating or promoting new technologies. Ruben Aspiras, of the University of the Philippines, spoke of the initial success and later failure of "green revolution" techniques in his country, and their link with the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). The combination of chemical-dependent agriculture and hybrid seeds led to the need to introduce new "pest resistant" varieties every year. Philippine farmers were locked into a dangerous IRRI dependence. Aspiras pointed out an alternate method of involving farmers in all aspects of research on agricultural improvement, and efforts to renew use of traditional seed varieties and farming methods not dependent on commercial chemicals.

Nicanor Perlas took the question of controlling agricultural research and development one step further. Perlas, who has been a key figure in challenging the American genetic engineering industry's requests for environmental releases of genetically altered bacteria, compared the scientific "hype" currently associated with genetic engineering research and development to the emergence of the nuclear power industry in the 1950s. Now, however, we have the example of the nuclear power experience to teach us that environmental impacts and social costs of any new technology demand that its proponents be socially accountable. He asked if we can trust the corporations that have invested heavily in genetic engineering to protect public interests, and pointed out the rapidly developing integration of international agricultural chemical and seed companies. The "new biotechnology" is as far from public control now as nuclear power was at its inception. No matter how alert the public may be to premature release of altered species in one country, unregulated tests may be carried out elsewhere -- third world activists should gear up for the onslaught now!

Kitty Tucker (of the Health and Energy Institute in the U.S.) provided similar warnings with regard to food irradiation -- using nuclear waste exposure to sterilize food and kill pests for storage and shipping. She pointed out that governments in countries with nuclear power or arms programs may have conflicts in interest in regulating the practice, which is currently employed on a very limited basis, as it provides a "productive" use for

nuclear waste. She compared food irradiation with using a chain saw to cut butter, and went on to warn of the slipshod nature of testing to determine if the practice is safe, and the risk that even countries forbidding it may unknowingly receive shipments of irradiated food. (Third world consumer activists, beware!) The bright side of food irradiation, however, is that it can be controlled in countries with effective consumer legislation, and it must be developed on a large scale to pay off -- with the possibility of effective food distributor and consumer boycotts.

Unique among the conference's often rambling talks was John Bonine's snappy five-minute lesson on how to request information from any U.S. government Agency using the Freedom of Information Act. Freely admitting that America exports pollution and environmental hazards, he also pointed out that American public interest law provides a tool for anyone -- in the U.S. or abroad -- to use in fighting back. He then volunteered his service and that of the Western Natural Resources Law Clinic at the University of Oregon to anyone needing information from a U.S. agency for public interest purposes.

The Asian and Pacific anti-nuclear movement was out in force in Penang. Trini Leung, of Hong Kong's Asia Monitor Resource Center, and Nagesh Hedge, of India's Sudha Weekly, provided critiques of the high costs of nuclear energy in East and South Asia, respectively. Safety was the primary consideration; diversion of resources from more appropriate uses was next. One of the most poignant presentations, however, made explicit connections between nuclear energy and nuclear arms development in terms of health effects. Rosalie Bertell, of the International Institute of Concern for Public Health (Canada), calmly presented statistics showing significant increases in fetal and infant deaths in Wisconsin during the 1960s and 1970s, as nuclear power plants in the region came on line and radionuclide levels in Wisconsin milk increased. The correlation was between "safe" plant operations and subtle health effects. Bertell then jumped to the Marshall Islands in Micronesia, where she led an international team attempting to assess health effects of weapons testing. Though stymied by official stonewalling and research prohibitions due to U.S. national security concerns, her team did not need to poke around for subtle effects. In the early 1980s, Marshallese women were still giving birth to babies without differentiated organs (known as "jellyfish babies") and one in ten children of school starting age, in the sample the team was able to investigate, had Downs syndrome.

Bertell concluded by comparing production of nuclear power and weapons to an addiction, with its secrecy, staggering expense, and ultimately devastating effects. "You can't turn an alcoholic into a social drinker," she stated, and prescribed a total ban on nuclear power and arms production, with refusal by the addict's friends to providing resources to support the deadly habit.

The case for a nuclear-free and independent Pacific was presented in simple terms by Violet Kahukura, who also pointed out the leadership roles of women in South Pacific peoples' movements. Speaking in the name of indigenous people of "Aotearoa," (New Zealand and other Polynesian lands) she called for a struggle of resistance to the "death culture of nuclear war," and the "second wave of colonialism" with a Maori saying: Those who sit will perish; those who stand will live. She ended with a hauntingly beautiful chant. I don't know what it meant, but it got enthusiastic applause from the crowd.

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Throughout the conference, "workshops" popped up spontaneously in corners of the dining room and under strategically placed trees. These gatherings often ran through mealtimes and late into the night -- no workshops had been planned as part of the structured meeting. While the substance of many of the talks was exciting, many of the participants were frustrated by the arbitrary paper-and-panel format and lack of allotted time for discussion. Women, especially, were rarely audacious enough to begin speaking before more verbose commenters dominated the limited discussion periods.

The night before the conference ended, I listened as new friends discussed their plans for the next few weeks. Haliaton Ibrahim was getting ready to begin a survey of workplace hazards to women in Penang's booming electronics industry. Sunderlal Bahaguna was flying to Mexico, to talk about Chipko at the invitation of Ivan Illich. The contingent from the Perak Anti-Nuclear Committee was driving back to Bukit Merah, half a day from Penang, to organize a march protesting renewal of Thorium waste dumping by the Asian Rare Earth factory.

About 20 of us were quickly making new plans for the week after the conference. Sahabat Alam Malaysia had planned a field trip to the interior of Sarawak. We were to travel to an area that would be flooded by the proposed Bakun Dam and visit the timber-rich upper reaches of the Baram River, where new logging operations were being opposed by longhouse dwellers and Penan tribespeople. During the week before the conference, Sahabat Alam received a polite letter from the Malaysian government (either Immigration or the Forestry Department, I'm not sure) stating that the trip would not be permitted.

Apparently, Penan had set up a blockade of roads and rivers leading to timber lease areas, and had virtually cut off four new logging camps. During the week of the conference, sensational newspaper stories repeated the government assertion that the blockade was orchestrated by Europeans living illegally in Sarawak. "Bruno," the elusive European agitator, had apparently written a letter about the blockade to the government and the local press on Sahabat Alam stationery. (Sahabat Alam staff in Penang were

furious.) With the State elections coming up in Sarawak and timber leasing a major issue, State officials were leary of foreigners going into sensitive areas -- especially under the auspices of Sahabat Alam Malaysia! The upper reaches of the Baram were officially closed to outsiders.

At the closing session of the conference, Chee Yoke Ling presided over hurried debate on a 20 page list of proposed declarations and resolutions. It seemed to me like a superfluous measure. My mind wandered as I pondered what had really been accomplished in the past few days.

Certainly, it was an education for me and others who tend to see environmental quality problems in narrow technical terms, and solutions in projects and regulation, rather than in fundamental transformation of cultural, economic, and political values. The political rhetoric and ideological orientation of many of the formal presentations seemed better suited to a rally or tent meeting rather than the plodding conference format. We had the inspired speeches, but where were the songs?

The event itself was remarkable, considering the long distance most participants had to travel and the usually tight budgets of Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the other nongovernmental groups represented. Conference funds had covered transportation costs for many participants, plus food and lodging for everyone! It was the first time that some participants had been out of their own countries.

My attention snapped back to page 19 of the declaration list. It was a brief statement recognizing women's leadership in actions directed to "saving our earth and the human family from destruction" and calling for a new vision, "embracing human diversity," necessary for the creation of an ecologically sound way of life. Several men demanded a more explicitly feminist statement. I wondered if it was compensation for an oversight in the original subtitle of the conference name: "Global Development and Environment Crisis -- Has Man a Future?" By the third day of the conference, the subtitle on the slickly lettered sign at the front of the meeting room had been discreetly changed to read "Have We a Future?" One of the last events of the meeting was officially changing the conference name.

I was somewhat amused at the formality of the whole conference process, considering the casual way in which most of the groups represented reported operating at home. A possible reason came to mind. The "radical alarmists" want to be believed, and formal conferences are a road to respectability. The collection of enormously diverse environmental and consumer advocates was creating common ground and coming of age through the conference ritual.

Sincerely yours,

Judith Thayer

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