



From heroes to zeros: One week in at the UN climate talks in Poland

By Sven Harmeling

The first week of the UN climate change talks here in Warsaw can be summed up in two words: 'heroes' and 'zeros'. As COP19 began, the extraordinary humanitarian tragedy caused by Typhoon Haiyan cast a long shadow over the conference as government negotiators, members of civil society and individuals lined up to express their solidarity with the people of the Philippines. Shocking images emerged of the sheer scale of the tragedy, and the considerable relief effort to help those affected, while Filipino negotiator Yeb Sano made a passionate plea for the world [to end the 'madness' of climate change inaction](#). Globally, thousands have now stood in solidarity with the people of the Philippines, whether by joining Yeb Sano's fast, signing petitions for urgent action to tackle climate change or marching through the streets of Warsaw on a cold November afternoon. These are the heroes who should be commended.

These expressions of solidarity are starkly contrasted by the 'zeros', with three countries squarely winning this gong. The new Australian government, which is now ruled by a climate-sceptic prime minister, de facto backtracked from its previous climate targets by announcing it was cutting climate finance for vulnerable countries and confirming plans to abolish its progressive carbon tax. It also obstructed important negotiations [to address the issue of loss and damage caused by the impacts of climate change](#).

Japan did not fare any better. On Friday, it announced its new climate targets for 2020 to disbelief from the conference floor. It has stepped away from an earlier commitment to reduce its emissions by 25% and proposed new targets that actually amount to an increase in the country's emissions on 1990 levels. In so doing, Japan has violated developed nations' commitment to take a leading role in the Convention. Though it promised USD16 billion for climate finance, this pledge is likely to contain a number of unwelcome elements (private finance, loans, and voluntary emission reduction credits, for example). Importantly, providing climate finance does not exempt countries from tackling global warming in the first place. The reaction was stark - small island states said Japan's announcement puts them in "greater danger", the Chinese representative said he did not have "any words to describe [his] dismay", the EU expressed its disappointment, and the UK said the move was also deeply disappointing. Governments need to reiterate to Japan next week that their change of tack is more than unwelcome.

Finally, Poland. Poland also scores a firm zero. Aside from politics, the Polish people are warm and hospitable hosts who have welcomed COP participants into their impressive national stadium, venue for the talks, and into their city. Recent polls also indicate that a large majority of Poles support the need to expand renewable energy and lament their government's stance on climate action. But the fact that Poland has constantly blocked EU progress on climate change and seems to be on the same tack in Warsaw; and its unforgivable decision to host a 'climate and coal summit' at the same time as the UN climate talks wins zero support from people working to tackle the causes, or already suffering the consequences, of climate change and its impacts. Widespread reminders that fossil fuel companies are amongst the key sponsors of this year's COP are just another reminder of how 'Coaland' has earned its nickname.

So, there you have it – a week of heroes and zeros with much work to do in the days ahead. As ministers begin arriving, they will need to hit the ground running if they are to achieve any real progress at this year's session. They have urgent decisions to make on key issues including loss and damage, climate finance and gender – and signal how their governments are planning to address the next steps on the road to achieving a new climate deal by 2015.

Whatever the talks achieve (or fail to achieve) before they close next Friday, they will be hard-pressed to match the rollercoaster of highs and lows – solidarity, survival, sadness, anger and frustration – which have marked the Warsaw COP so far.

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Links:

End the madness of climate change inaction, a blog by CARE's Aarjan Dixit
http://www.careclimatechange.org/files/The_madness_of_climate_change_inaction.pdf

New CARE, ActionAid, WWF report, Tackling the climate reality:
http://www.careclimatechange.org/files/tackling_the_climate_reality.pdf