

KERATAN AKHBAR



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Time to step up on climate action

GIVEN that the effects of climate change are becoming more apparent than ever, global action against climate change can no longer be delayed. However, climate action, which is founded upon the principles of justice and equity, must strike a balance between the legitimate concerns of global warming and the livelihoods of the most vulnerable states and their people.

It was under this narrative, alongside the juxtaposition of off-conflicting national interests, that the Paris Agreement on Climate Change was struck in December 2015. Despite criticism that the resulting agreement was fundamentally incapable of tackling climate change as a whole, and that thousands of species and habitats would still be at risk of extinction even if its goals were met, I feel the achievement is nonetheless to be celebrated because for the first time in the history of climate action, world leaders set aside their differences to pursue a common concern of humankind.

The Paris Agreement represented a milestone because it finally secured the participation of virtually all nations including the top emitters (notably the United States and China). Participation was, and still is, crucial in this field given

that climate change is a global phenomenon which does not recognise territorial borders. As such, it requires a globally coordinated response.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the luxuries we enjoy in one corner of Mother Earth might have contributed to environmental degradation somewhere else. For instance, the agricultural and manufacturing industries, which serve to satisfy the demands of consumers from wealthy nations, are commonly located in less well-off countries that often lack the capacity to respond to the changing climate brought about by the harmful industrial processes.

With such complexities of cause-and-effect in climate science and justice, membership of the US in the Paris Agreement, which constitutes the participation of not only a top emitter but also a large proportion of the first world's population, was to be welcomed, particularly after the noteworthy failure of its predecessor, the Kyoto Protocol.

In this context, it is not difficult to understand the worldwide anger directed at President Donald Trump for withdrawing from the Paris Agreement. With one in seven people still living without electricity, the developmental

needs of the least developed countries for basic survival should be prioritised against the economic concerns of the wealthier ones.

While global warming affects mankind as a whole, it hits the most vulnerable nations more severely (for example small island nations and the threat of rising sea levels). And this is worsened by the financial incapability of some vulnerable nations to remedy the situation.

Here, the distinction made by Henry Shue between subsistence emissions and luxury emissions is relevant. Subsistence emissions, such as emissions from the burning of a single light bulb per household in poorer nations to prevent total darkness at night, are necessary for mere survival, and we cannot expect these less fortunate families to reduce their carbon footprint by living in the dark.

Luxury emissions, such as those caused by unnecessary air travel when there are ground travel options (with comparable trip durations), are avoidable. Therefore, a developed nation such as the US is expected to not only cut its luxury emissions but also provide climate finance to the needy. Nonetheless, by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, Trump is blatantly tell-

ing the rest of the world that the US does not care about what happens beyond its fictitious wall. It thus seems that we (the rest of the world) are expected to pursue higher mitigation efforts to compensate for the US' withdrawal even if that means cutting subsistence emissions of the less fortunate nations. Imagine all the extra burden on us just so the Americans could resurrect their coal industry to make them great again!

By virtue of Article 28 of the Agreement, a withdrawal cannot happen overnight. Therefore, the US is technically still part of the climate regime.

However, climate action necessitates an immediate response by the rest of the world, and this could be by respectively notching their emission reduction targets up through the mechanism provided by Article 4.11 of the Agreement. But with politics at play, such expectations might appear as overly naive. Nevertheless, it is not impossible because Paris was, for once in international law, a manifestation of leadership by not only developed countries but also developing countries, and this must be safeguarded.

It is hoped the Malaysian Government, which ambitiously declared its aims to reduce the

country's greenhouse gas emissions intensity of GDP by 45% by 2030, would not only maintain such a commendable spirit but also explore the possibilities of scaling the targets up to enhance our stewardship in the climate arena.

As for the ordinary folks who wish to contribute despite having no such mandate under the Paris Agreement, a simple change from traditional light bulbs to modern LED bulbs at home and the workplace would do good in reducing our carbon footprint.

The Paris Agreement, which is the result of years of tough negotiations at the United Nations, must by all means be upheld to secure environmental integrity. A country's economic development should never cost the livelihoods of its contemporaries nor compromise the needs of the future generations.

The withdrawal of the US not only sets us a step backwards but also puts the survival of our future generations at risk.

However, while the Americans cannot avoid falling on the wrong side of history, the rest of the world could nevertheless pursue all efforts to avoid being Trumped.

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