

On the State of the World

By Wakamatsu Kenji

The World Summit on Sustainable Development concluded in Johannesburg on Sept. 4 after the participants adopted a Plan of Implementation, which calls for conservation of the global environment and poverty eradication in the developing countries inside the process of globalization. There was debate on the measures each country can adopt, and examination of the progress made on Agenda 21, the plan of action adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro a decade ago, which tried to reconcile environmental conservation and economic growth.

There has been further degradation of the global environment over the past 10 years, while the progress in globalization and liberalization has increased the gap between rich and poor amongst nations and regions. Official development assistance (ODA) is declining, even though the developing countries had asked the rich countries to contribute up to 0.7% of their gross national product (GNP) for this purpose. The conservation of resources and greater use of clean sources of energy to prevent global warming were topics for debate.

Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Jun-ichiro was amongst the leaders and representatives of 191 nations and territories who took part in this conference. The actual number of participants exceeded 60,000 when we include the representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). One person was absent, however, U.S. President George W. Bush. Other countries have sensed unilateralism in recent U.S. behavior, and the United States has ultimately been condemned by the developing countries and the environmentalists in the rich countries for its lack of enthusiasm on various issues.

The Plan of Implementation lists points of agreement on broad-ranging issues. It wants to deal with poverty by establishing a World Solidarity Fund to halve the proportion of the world's people who earn less than US\$1 a day, as well as to halve the proportion of people who lack access to safe drinking water and the barest sanitary facilities. There

is a call to develop a 10-year program for transforming the patterns of production and consumption. However, the Plan merely urges countries to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on global warming. Nor was any agreement reached on specific numerical targets for the greater use of wind power, solar power and other renewable sources of energy. Moreover, trade rules centering on the agricultural produce of the developing countries, an issue that the developing countries want the rich countries to address, will be handled by the World Trade Organization. Many problems were thus deferred, which undeniably disappointed the participants.

However, there was a degree of success in putting together an action plan for the next decade, and in the growing common awareness of the situation in the developing countries and the environmental degradation that has occurred over the past 10 years. The national leaders, in the end, adopted a political declaration, which shows an awareness of humanity at the crossroads. Surmounting the vast disparities of wealth and poverty, surmounting the continuing destruction of the global environment and surmounting the maldistribution of wealth caused by globalization, are regarded as the challenges of this era.

Meanwhile, Japan has suffered from economic decline in the 10 years since the bursting of the so-called "bubble economy." The financial institutions still have massive non-performing loans, while the government's finances also have to contend with massive bond levels. The major issue is the pursuit of structural reforms by the government and the public sector. The government and the regional authorities are meanwhile trying to review major public works projects concerned with the construction of dams and motorways. On the matter of ODA, there is also a need for more quality over quantity.

At the Johannesburg Summit, Japan mentioned that it would take careful note of the realities in the developing countries, and that efforts would be made to

provide aid in the areas in which Japan excels, namely, education, health and agriculture. For this to occur, it will be desirable to give more strength to Japan's NGOs, which are still few in number compared to the West, and to foster greater sensitivity in the younger generations for the realities outside Japan.

A recently announced opinion poll by the Cabinet Office said that more and more Japanese have been seeking a sense of spiritual well-being since the 1980s. The poll found a record number of respondents, 60.7%, seeking a sense of "spiritual" well-being in contrast to a sense of "material" well-being. Moreover, 67% of respondents expressed satisfaction with their everyday lives. More people have a sense of satisfaction, in spite of the economic decline.

The results showed a soundness of feelings amongst the Japanese. I think they show that Japan still possesses an undercurrent of strength to contribute to the world at a time when questions are being asked abroad about Japan's declining international influence and presence.

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