



**WILL THERE BE CLIMATE JUSTICE?
BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX**

Dartmouth College Professor Michael Dorsey has been here in Copenhagen since the first of December. Armed with computer, pad and cell phone, he is among the African American environmentalist who has come to both observe and influence negotiations around climate change. While activists like Felicia Davis, Kari Fulton, Bennett College student Hershelle Gaffney, and others have been in Copenhagen since the COP15 conference began, members of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies' Commission to Engage African Americans in Climate Change arrived in Copenhagen on Sunday, December 13. Led by Carolyn Green, of EnerGreen Capital Management, staffed by the Joint Center's Gina Wood, Royce Brooks, and Lindsay Boroush of the Joint Center, and including the godfather of environmental justice, Dr. Robert Bullard (along with Dr. Beverly Wright, Frank Stewart of the American Association of Blacks in Energy, Dr. Leslie Fields of the Sierra Club, and yours truly), we are grateful for the briefing offered by Dr. Dorsey, and so many others involved in this UN Conference.

In the United States, too many of our eyes glaze over when climate change is discussed. In the African American community, especially, there is little urgency about reducing the level of emissions that we produce. In the developing world, on the other hand, there is extreme urgency. Islands are disappearing under water, and the glaciers on Mount Kilimanjaro are crumbling. More importantly, people are being displaced and dying on the African continent and around the world because of the disintegration of the planet through droughts, floods and new weather patterns.

Beverly Wright and Robert Bullard say that there are 150 million environmental refugees around the world, people who have been displaced because environmental shifts – the drying of a river, the loss of a forest – affect their lives and livelihoods. With about 20 activists sitting around a table in a Copenhagen hotel, the facts fly fast and furious. There is tension here because the United States has not yet passed legislation committing even to the Kyoto protocol, and without legislation, we appear like hypocrites, preaching to the world about reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but failing to commit to do so on our own. There is also tension because developing countries want the developed world to pay a "climate debt", or up to \$400 billion to clean up the mess we've made with the environment. Yet, the US chief negotiator, Robert Stern has been noncommittal, if not downright hostile, to the notion of a climate debt. His hands are tied by the fact that the Senate has not yet acted, and by the recession-plagued US economy.

Yet our pollution places a burden on the rest of the world. And greenhouse gas emissions are, in some ways, linked to economic development. China is the leading producer of greenhouse gasses, surpassing the United States in 2006. However, on a per capita basis they lag behind the United States. And china is not likely to severely limit its emission production because they are in the middle of a growth trajectory they aren't yet ready to stop. From a historical perspective, can they

really be held to the same standards as the United States, which has done so much polluting for so long?

Leading up to these meetings, the G77 countries (developing countries on the African continent, and in Latin America) threatened a boycott of the COP15 meetings. Representatives of more than 50 countries, mostly African, walked out of Barcelona pre-meetings to send a signal that they'd rather not agree to a flawed deal. Some activists say there is no way a deal is coming out of this conference. And yet the longer we go without a deal, the more stress we place on the planet.

The quality of much of the dialogue here is rich, and part of the reason NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) come to UN meetings is to link up with other social movements around the globe. Copenhagen is an interesting place to have a meeting like this, as the city has a visible commitment to climate justice. Public transportation is provided, free, for conference attendees. There is a sign on the elevator in our hotel that asks why we are riding, not taking the stairs. It costs 4 kroner (about 80 cents) to get a plastic bag at the grocery store, and when I question the charge the clerk asks if I am attending COP15 and tells me I should have brought my own bag. And there are moving signs in the airport and on the street that urge us to "save the planet".

African Americans have a dog in this fight. How many New Orleanians are environmental refugees? We can't fight a civil rights struggle on a destabilized planet. And we know that destabilization hits people of color hardest, whether on the African continent, where women now walk extra miles to find daily sources of clean water, or in the United States. There may be no deal by the end of this week, but surely more seeds have been sown to get to a deal before more damage is done.