NOTES while Being Scammed in the Sun at COP 27 and Under the Weather at COP 15 - by Ahti Tolvanen, CUSJ board member and Observer to COP 27, the UN Climate Conference in Sharm El Sheik, Egypt and COP 15, The UN Biodiversity Conference in Montreal.

The Sinai Peninsula is a barren place. When I stepped off the plane at Sharm EL Sheik on the night of Nov 8th, 2022, an artificial tourist Mecca built with oil dollars on the Peninsula’s Red Sea coast, the hot night air of the desert enveloped my winter-adapted body. I was thoroughly frisked, and my documents intensely scanned by burly officials while young local greeters with tourist brochures and wide smiles looked on. I wondered how many of these burly types in uniform had been involved in beating up and interrogating the democracy protesters 9 years ago during the Arab Spring.

Apparently about 60 000 activists, along with Muslim extremists, were still incarcerated in a dozen new prisons built to hold them.
The taxi I had pre-booked was nowhere. I got past the last smiling greeters in Bedouin attire and found a driver who said he knew my hotel. He did not and drove back and forth for an hour looking for it until I spotted the electric sign of Sharks Bay Oasis. That was only the beginning of the chaos. They had never heard of me at the hotel although I had my Air B’nB booking number.

I protested that this seemed to be a scam to lure people to their pandemic stressed hotel so that stranded arrivals had no choice but to agree to be gouged. The clerk told me to “relax” and “be quiet”. Then ensued an hour of texting to Air B’nB as a result of which they agreed to refund my money.

Then I checked in with the surly clerk, who "found" me a room at only twice what I had booked. There was an extra fee for internet which I reluctantly paid. I was too tired to get in a taxi and try to find another place. I paid the driver off and dismissed him.

Back home the situation would likely have led me to call the police. Even my mention of "the police" only brought a knowing smile and I quickly thought better of it. The way a couple of men with white shirts and ties were standing by listening to my complaints made me think I was probably already in the presence of some kind of secret police. In fact, it was fast sinking in on me that I was in a police state. I trudged off with my bags to my room in a detached block of flats and tried to check my email before retiring. The connection kept cutting off and I quickly fell into the bed and immediately asleep. This experience of having one’s hotel fees doubled was apparently par for the course among my fellow NGO attendees. Many were also the subject of police raids and searches at hotels in the middle of the night.

In the morning I went to sit in the lobby to sip tea and look at the scenery.

Looking away from the coast there was a field of dry wasteland which led to low arid mountains. The entire scene was devoid of vegetation or any signs of life. Apparently it almost never rained here. The palm trees and grass turf around the hotels was seemingly brought in by landscapers and watered with hidden pipes from somewhere. It was a preview of the permanent drought forecast for the Mediterranean area by some climate scientists by century’s end. I was musing over whether to go hotel hunting or find my way to the COP 27 conference site.

**Inside the Blue Zone**

A group of Germans, Brits and other western NGO people were gathering in the lobby and they shared with me the shuttle bus to the main venue.

I got photographed and tagged in no time at the observers’ window. Then I went to a press conference pavilion to find out if fellow observer, Daphne Wynsham, had
benefitted from my contact tips and succeeded in booking a briefing on the methane crises for Methane Action, which she headed up. She had, and was there able to announce a Global Pact to Reduce Methane Emissions joined in by 150 states. Although China, Russia and India did not join, in my view it was one of the most valuable things to come out of the conference.

I went on to a Climate Action Africa event in time to hear Egypt’s Minister of Development Hala El Said describe a program of adaption projects all over the continent. I noted she did not mention loss and damage funding, although it was anticipated this would be a major demand at COP 27 of developing countries in which Egypt was expected to take a leading role.

I surmised this was the result of American lobbying and project promising that had taken place. US aversion to any notion of “climate reparations” was well known from John Kerry’s remarks.

The next day I joined the CAN-RAC briefing which Eddy Perez opened with despondent remarks about the Canadian government’s recent approval of a vast new oil project in Newfoundland’s Baie du Nord by the Norwegian oil giant Equinor. A press conference with Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault was announced later that day. I remembered Guilbeault from previous COPs where we had both worked on the CAN newsletter editing team. Now he was a cabinet minister signing off on mega fossil fuel projects, while I was still among the grass roots trying to edit climate action bulletins on a dysfunctional internet service.

I was glad the Guilbeault briefing was overbooked when I arrived at the door, so I did not need to fight an urge to stuff one of those bulletins down his throat. During the CAN-RAC briefing I raised the question of how the massive growth in military spending and emissions, particularly by alliances like NATO - which had become the world’s biggest source of CO2 emissions - might be referenced in the COP proceedings. This suggestion was supported by Tamara Lorincz, who was in the room that day on behalf of the Women’s International League for Peace. She advised me that military emissions had been excluded from limitations in the climate treaty at the instance of the U.S. since Kyoto. In less than a decade NATO has raised military expenditures from 600 billion to 1.3 trillion USD and at the onset of the Ukraine war has set expected member contributions at 2% of GDP.

Tamara told me of her work on a PhD on the military’s climate impact at Wilfred Laurier University. She said she was coming to Helsinki to speak so I offered to put her in touch with Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, who had been a leading voice against NATO, when I first became acquainted with him when we worked together on founding Finland’s Green Party. Haavisto had brought over Petra Kelly and Gert Bastian, two of Germany’s leading campaigners against nuclear weapons bases in Europe. The year after I was introduced to Kelly and Bastian the press reported their double suicide in mysterious circumstances. Haavisto was outspoken about his strong suspicion that
Kelly's and Bastien's suicides were staged by intelligence agents due to their opposition to NATO. Another example, he said, of how NATO was a threat to European democracy. Last year Haavisto surprisingly announced his support of Finnish-Swedish NATO membership. Haavisto was at the conference but he managed to evade me just like Guilbeault. I wanted to join Tamara in a meeting with him and ask him about his equally stunning about-face. Messages to the Green Party later in Helsinki went unanswered.

At the Fringes the COP

The NGO briefing broke off early so everyone could attend a rally for the release of Alaa Fattah, a young Egyptian democracy activist first jailed during the Arab Spring. The rally was held in the restricted Blue Zone, far removed from the Green Zone area which the authorities had designated for demonstrations. In addition to international observers many brave Egyptians spoke out demanding the release of jailed democracy and climate justice activist friends. The police stood by on the sidelines and filmed everything. There has been no news of what repercussions outspoken locals might have experienced afterwards. The appetite for greater ambition on emissions, beyond what had been accomplished in Glasgow seemed missing in the plodding argumentation of the plenaries. The breakthrough statement at the end of the Stockholm Plus 50 Conference of last June to actually “phase out” burning of fossil fuels - something the Glasgow COP delegates balked at in the last hours - seemed forgotten. The annual 100 billion USD in loss and damage funding to the most vulnerable countries seemed to be losing momentum too.

I took a day off to visit Cairo and the ruins of Egypt’s magnificent past. Surely there must be something to be learned from those ancient civilizations which had lasted thousands of years, longer than the 200 or so year lifespan of our industrial world? I looked down from the plane window at the Sinai desert where the Children of Israel wandered for forty years in search of the Promised Land. They would have starved in that harsh landscape but for the mana. The scriptures tell us the Lord brought it down from heaven to feed his people and save them. What mana could the nations, gathered for deliberation in Sharm El Sheik, expect as the climate crises closed in on them despite three decades of conferences?

Then the morning sun revealed Mount Sinai where God handed down to Moses the commandments which his people were to follow to ensure divine protection. Had the time come for a new draft of those commandments? I wondered. I spent the day roaming the Giza Plateau near Cairo with its six pyramids and The Sphinx. They spoke of a world of harmony and stability with a refined sense of beauty, now completely lost to us except for these magnificent ruins.
Discussing the fall of civilizations with local historian, Jassar Arafar at the Giza pyramids.

What had become of those empires is shrouded in mystery. Invasions by barbarians fleeing environmental deterioration is one of many new popular theories.

Waiting for the flight back to Sharm El Sheik I chatted with Naz Baloch, Pakistan’s Parliamentary Secretary in the waiting area. The floodwaters which had inundated half of her country, drowning hundreds, were still receding. I felt better due to that encounter for taking a day off from the climate crises, as even she felt seeing the pyramids was a cultural duty to our hosts.

The conference plodded on. New commitments to cut out burning of fossils fuels seemed to be slipping away despite ardent insistence from the EU, as the Egyptian presidency seemed reluctant to embarrass its oil-rich neighbours. There was also no movement on loss and damage to developing nations bearing the brunt of climate change. The plight of millions facing starvation due to drought and famine next door in Ethiopia and Somalia hardly came up. Perhaps starving people lack the resources and connections for flights and visas to international conferences. The heat, long hours and the dysfunctional data links seemed to be wearing down the NGO community.

The local hosts laid on entertainers at the NGO’s Naama Bay base camp hotel and on sea cruise boats. Thousands of NGO delegates swarmed to the party venues to shake off the stress. Gaily clad dancers and barely clad voluptuous belly dancers soon had the young NGO community dancing and raving. Shades of Sodom and Gomorrah? It is hard to say what effect the partying had on the outcome.
Text to move ahead on loss and damage next year in the Emirates made the final document on the final day of the conference. This was likely inspired by Brazil’s president-elect Lula’s impassioned denunciation of the countries preoccupied with a wasteful Ukraine war while millions suffered in the South. For his own part, he pledged a turnaround on destruction of the Amazon. On the other hand, progress or mitigation and fossil fuel phase-out, perhaps most problematic for the Egyptians, fizzled out.

The IMF’s forecast that the USD 5.9 trillion in fossil fuel subsidies in 2020 would increase 0.5% annually through 2025 seemed still right on track.

It was still dark when my return flight took off and skirted the Eastern Mediterranean coast as the sun rose. In my imagination it illuminated the epic setting of the Megiddo Plain where the last battle of Armageddon was prophesised by Holy Scriptures of at least three religions. The place, according to prophecy, where the worldly governments led by Satan would be defeated by divine forces and the reign of evil would be replaced-in a vision which might be called the ultimate “just transition”- by a millennium of justice.

My plane stopped over in Istanbul. As I showered at a hotel the hue and cry was on in the streets for Kurdish dissidents Erdogan’s authorities suspected of a deadly bombing in the city. After I left came the reports of Turkish attacks with chemical weapons on the Kurdish zone in Iraq. A young European engineer, who worked in the Siberian oilfields occupying the seat beside me during the next leg of my flight, observed that the impact of the energy boycott on Russia seemed slight and had mainly been circumvented by new markets whereas Western Europeans were facing a winter of skyrocketing prices and power shortages.

My next stop was Saint Petersburg, Russia. I had to wait until the next day to get a bus to join my wife in Helsinki because the Finns had cut off all air and rail traffic to demonstrate their zeal to support NATO’s efforts against Russia in the Ukraine. Their NATO membership was being held up by Turkey due to past Finnish and Swedish denunciations of Kurdish persecution in Turkey.

I had dinner at my hotel, The Angleterre, only to discover when my cheque came that my credit card was embargoed in Russia by Western banks. The waitress looked at me with sympathetic eyes and told me there would be “no charge”. She said I was welcome back anytime. I had plenty of time during my seven-hour prepaid bus trip home to reflect on the war and my growing disaffection with it. It was dark and snowing when we crossed the Finnish border at last. I had a mind to call friend Haavisto personally to say what I thought of his embargoes. Of course, I didn’t.
Montreal Epilogue

I had followed preparations for the UN Conference on Biodiversity (COP 15) intently, since the Chinese presidency, after a two-year delay, agreed with Canada to move the venue to Montreal from Kunming.

I was convinced the event from December 9th to 18th had the potential to be an historically unsurpassed moment, because of the issues it addressed in the drafts for a Decade of Action, from ongoing massive species loss to potentially protecting and rewilding over 30% of land and sea areas.

The successful outcome document, thanks largely to the skills of Canadian and Chinese diplomacy, led by ministers Huang Rungui and Steven Guilbeault, was a small miracle. For some days the media coverage justifiably overshadowed the prior climate talks. A sudden cold had put an end to my thoughts of going to Montreal. Instead, I was able to participate as a virtual observer, even to host a webinar event with Nordic Climate Reality, and raise the irony of the recent Equinor deal once again. After all, the Norwegians were the other half of that scheme.

John Liu’s remarks, while sitting in a drafty foyer of the Montreal Palais de Congress during my webcast on the last days of COP 15, added welcome and long awaited clarity. My first visit to the Montreal Palais had been in 1997 volunteering to help senior shut-ins take shelter from the 1997 Ice Storm. Then there was much uncertainty about whether this historic weather event was part of a global climate crises. Liu described his work with the Common Land Foundation on land restoration involving millions of acres globally. Liu describe how such work had gone on for decades now and would continue to expand regardless of international conference outcomes. He said it was valuable work almost everyone could do on some scale. “Do what you can and get on with enjoying life” Liu advised. Such words were like a balm to ears weary with weeks of conference rhetoric.

In the COP 15 final document there were many hope-inspiring references to the need to stem investments in environmentally destructive activities, as well as the new funds for environmental restoration in developing countries through contributions to the Global Environmental Facility. The need to stop habitat encroachment by invasive species was particularly highlighted in Montreal but no reference was made in that context to the most invasive species of all: homo sapiens. Our invasion, with our farm animals, of more and more habitats is making our own survival evermore challenging. Undoubtedly many delegates would have found such policy framing offensive, making its insertion a political impossibility. Nor were fossil fuels mentioned in the COP 15 outcome, but many elements of a just transition, which were the raison d’être of many NGOs, were highlighted including aboriginal rights, respect of cultural differences and gender equity. No specifics about the rights of Uighurs in China or Iranian women of course, nor Canada’s Tar Sands or Equinor. That would have caused the deliberations to fall apart. But someday soon we will have to get to such specifics or COP 15 will become
pointless. We will have to move beyond this new China-Canada politics of duplicity in Montreal, where the leading national greenhouse gases emitter and the leading per capita emitter shaped the deliberations.

**Last Digressions**

Clearly the protection of all these rights highlighted at COP 15 is predicated on there being any transition at all away from environmental destruction. Something that cannot be demonstrated since the Convention on Biodiversity was first ratified in 1992. (With the USA and the Vatican opting out). We need more real work and fewer declarations from now on. Because the best science we have tells us we are running out of time to avert the tipping points. I beg the reader’s indulgence for the sacral language, but that what lies ahead just may not be the post-Armageddon era of justice. Then there are those who justify inaction, saying it is already too late to avert the collapse of human civilization.

I reread a letter by Alaa El-Fattah I had found after the demonstration in Sharm El Sheik. His letter from prison has the oft-repeated quote: “Unlike me you have not been defeated yet”. Unlike the imprisoned author, WE still have room to act. Each of us still has agency, has a voice. Experts tell us we have barely a decade to act before environmental collapse becomes unstoppable. Before we too are imprisoned like Alaa, in circumstances created by humans but no longer in our control.