

First day of COP17, UN's Climate Change Conference in Durban, South Africa

Opening Ceremony

COP17 was officially opened Monday 28th Nov. with a welcome ceremony attended by the President of the Republic of South Africa, His Excellency, Mr Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma and H.E. Ms Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation for the Republic of South Africa and President Elect of COP17/CMP7, together with many other dignitaries.

Despite limited access for NGO's, due to their registration as a Research and Independent Organisation (RINGO), the Brahma Kumaris received invitations for 3 people. Sister Jayanti, Golo Pilz and Usha Jevan from Durban attended the welcome ceremony, which also included spectacular African Zulu dance and singing.

During the two weeks of the conference our exhibition stand at COP17 will serve as a focal point of our central theme of the conference Consciousness and Climate Change – Building Capacity and Building Power (Solar Energy).

Inter-generational Dialogue – Honouring Wisdom and Strengthening Commitment – University of KuzuNatel at Howard College, Shepstone

The first program at the NGO Forum with Panellists:

Sister Jayanti – Director Brahma Kumaris Europe and Middle East

Youth: Theresa Mungazi – Program Manager for Young Voices Network with a degree in Applied Environmental Sciences, Zimbabwe

Dr Sandika Baboolal- Medical doctor with special interest in environment

Simmi Dullay - Lecturer in gender studies, Degree in Fine Arts

Edna Kapotoyo - Programme officer at Indigenous Information Network

Four professional and dynamic young women joined Sister Jayanti in a lively and informative dialogue moderated by Devindree Pillay. Their conversation touched on many key issues around climate change and other major crisis facing humanity today; justice, gender equality, value based education and inter-generational communication, to name a few.

Theresa emphasised the need for value based education and posed the question; 'Decisions are based on our value system, but the spiritual dimension is missing. When I share some of my ideas, young people just look at me strangely. How can I get my ideas across in an acceptable way?' Sister Jayanti took up the topic by saying "Young people don't want to be seen as the odd one out and so create ideas that catch on with them such as cycling instead of driving wherever you go or buying local foods in season instead of imports. This way it becomes 'in' to be 'green'".

Coming from an activist family, Simmi shared some of her disillusionment around initiatives such as COP17. She felt that negotiations do not bring about justice, only compromise and so issues such as wealth distribution and gender inequality are never resolved. Therefore the plight of the poor and women, in particular, especially in Africa, is never improved. Sister Jayanti responded that "Injustice can create anger, but this approach compounds the problem. Criticism separates me from others and then I cannot influence them. First I have to remove my own weaknesses and then I can engage calmly and clearly with others and achieve my goals. With truth we are able to make a difference and bring about the change that we would like to see".

In the evening a **welcome reception hosted by the President of COP 17/CMP 7, took place at the City Hall of Durban.** The large room was filled to capacity and decorated creatively with recycled materials such as cushions stitched out of sugar sacks. Soft green spotlights flooded the room from high ceilings highlighting a 'forest' of cleverly stitched hearts and African continents made from stuffed newspaper hanging from white painted branches. Julia Grindon-Welch and Sonja Ohlsson attended and met many fellow delegates.

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Two presentations on Solar Energy

- **NGO Forum, enthusiastic crowd of 200 people at the C7 NGO forum at University of KwaZulu Natel**
- **Digital Media Lounge in the Durban Exhibition Centre**

The BKWSU has established a solar thermal power plant (India-One Project) at Shantivan Campus in India which is set to reduce the negative effects of global warming. This project is a first of its kind and demonstrates the possibility of using alternative technology to reduce global warming and curb climate change. The solar energy advisor; BK Joachim Golo Pilz gave two presentations on "Use of Renewable Energy for A Better Future in India" at the COP17 on Tuesday 29 November 2011 at the COP17 Durban Exhibition Centre and at the NGO Forum. The presentations showcased the India-One Solar project and how it has contributed to sustainable development. It drew a lot of attention from a number of COP17 delegations.. Throughout the presentation BK Joachim Golo Pilz stressed on the importance of focusing on individual actions and shifting our consciousness in order to contribute to a better future for humanity. The presentation was inspirational and encouraged individual transformation, and gave little steps that we can take to contribute to sustainability. He explained the link between spirituality and climate change, and encouraged the audience to become peaceful, think about the self, others and the world and take action. To wrap up his presentation he gave an inspirational quote by Mahatma Gandhi, " You may never know what results come from your actions, but if you do no action there will be no result." Everyone was encouraged to play their part and become more peaceful.

An Earth Care Workshop facilitated by Ruth Liddle from UK at Diakonia. Diakonia is the interfaith secretariat and meeting place during the climate change conference. The interfaith movement in South Africa is historically strong, and very engaged in the environmental movement. Belinda Westcott from Johannesburg was a participant from the Brahma Kumaris in South Africa.

The title of the Earth Care workshop was clearly the attraction for the group that gathered. Using their creative licence, they began by visualizing an ideal world. Priorities were definitely a world free from greed, materialism and ego; a world in which all are safe and secure, a world of equality in which there is a natural responsibility for the earth. A world free from selfish accumulation and the mind set of 'I want more'.

The second module required the participants to write a letter from the earth to themselves and it had to be written with the opposite hand to the one we normally use - quite an entertaining exercise. These letters highlighted the connection between the state of the human family and the condition of the planet. When there is respect for all forms of nature, then the earth flourishes and so do human beings. One letter was very practical; 'recycle waste and water, switch off the lights, grow something and respect all living things.' The participants especially appreciated the time for themselves to reflect in silence about the things that were meaningful to them – care for the earth.

Quiet Room at COP17

For the first time in a COP conference, this being the 17th COP, there is now a quiet room for the negotiators and accredited delegates to use. The South African Faith Community Environment Initiative (SAFCEI) negotiated this with the COP17 organisers, and SAFCEI then asked the Brahma Kumaris, who are part of their committee, to decorate it. A simple but beautiful decoration was made with a white background, flowers, plants and a green-blue point of light painting for meditation. Sister Jayanti and the accredited green team came for an evening meditation to start creating the atmosphere.

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Media morning at C7, NGO Forum at University of KwaZulu-Natal

On this beautiful summer morning Sister Jayanti and Golo Pilz were interviewed by both Live TV and radio on the veranda of the university overlooking the green hillsides of Durban.

The TV Station SABC 3 LIVE has a special COP17 feature and they were very interested in what was happening at the Peoples Forum. The first slot was given to Sister Jayanti, asking how the power of thought can really help the climate change crisis. The next slot was given to Golo Pilz, and the interest was around the renewable energy projects in India and what the chances are of that being developed in South Africa.

Directly thereafter there were interviews with Radio Lotus FM Newsbreak with Sister Jayanti and Golo Pilz. Both topics of Consciousness & Climate Change and Solar Energy created a lot of interest. Radio Lotus had previously interviewed Dr. Rakhsa Balbahadur from the Durban BK centre, asking the same question: What is the link between spirituality and the environment.

Consciousness and Climate Change - Confluence of Two Living Systems

It was a beautiful gathering of multi colours and cultures who listened with great attention to Sister Jayanti. 'Human beings have had a tremendous impact on the environment and therefore on climate.' Sister Jayanti highlighted some of the dramatic changes happening in nature around our planet and the devastating impact that it has and will continue to have on human beings. Quoting Dr Rajendra Pachauri she said "if temperatures increase by 2 degrees celcius, we have no idea of its impact on our oceans; including ocean life and the earth beneath it. It is too late to reverse some of the factors, but maximum time we have to try to reverse things is until 2015."

Sister Jayanti described nature as a living eco system that we have been exploiting and oppressing and what we are seeing is nature's reaction to that. Everything starts in the human mind and because we have got caught up in physical consciousness, matter, we have become absorbed in materialism and consumerism. We have forgotten our own energy; the power of the mind, and if we change to spirit consciousness, by creating thoughts of peace, love and compassion, we re-connect to our own inner truth. Without this, there is an emptiness of spirit that can't be filled and we are consumed by our needs and wants. In the words of Mahatma Ghandi 'there's enough for everyone's need, but not enough for one person's greed'.

Sister Jayanti expanded further by saying 'When I know who I am deeply, at an inner level, there is self-respect and when there is self-respect, there is no discriminatory behaviour. I will respect myself, others, all forms of life and the living system of the earth. We have had more value for a barrel of oil than for a human life.'

Sister Jayanti also highlighted the difficult position of governments. If they impose their decisions on climate change, and if people reject them, they can lose their positions of power. With all our information and communication systems, it's 'people power' that can bring about the change and it's the awareness of spirit that empowers us as individuals to make those changes. Our inner core values of peace, love, truth, joy and purity awaken and this in turn builds our capacity to simplify our needs, reduce our dependencies and draw from our inner resources at the time of need.

After the talk Sister Jayanti was interviewed by the national newspaper "New Age" who is featuring Environment & Sustainability in connection with all the thousands visitors to Durban this month.

Living in Harmony exhibition at Climate Change Expo

The BK's have an exhibition at the Climate Change Response Arena, which hosts major exhibitors from different countries. At this expo, together with three beautiful panels reflecting our key message - Climate & Consciousness, Solar Energy and Yogic Agriculture, the stand offers some interactive activities which are very popular. We have a large wire tree and people are invited to write a message for the earth on a green leaf and hang it on the branches. This exhibition is open to the public and so many school children were very intrigued and enthusiastically shared messages of hope. We also have an online survey where people can calculate how green their day was. In addition, beautiful meditations by Carmen Warrington, a short movie to share the essence of our message visually and cards with special green slogans. All this offers the public a lovely opportunity to engage in conversation with BKs and is proving to be very popular.