

Climate deal falls short of key goals

Juliet Eilperin and Anthony Faiola, Washington Post, 12-19-09

COPENHAGEN -- President Obama helped broker a climate deal with a group of leading nations that provides for monitoring emission cuts by each country but sets no global target for cutting greenhouse gases, and no deadline for reaching a formal international climate treaty.

The deal falls far short of many countries' expectations for the summit and leaves a comprehensive battle plan for climate change potentially years away. Although the agreement included some major players -- China, India, Brazil and South Africa -- it was not universally agreed upon by the 193 nations attending the summit. In fact, some leaders left early Friday in apparent frustration.

For the Obama administration, the focus of the climate debate shifts to the domestic stage. Though Obama voiced hopes for greater results, the modest agreement may help the administration as it presses Congress to pass landmark climate-change legislation.

By not committing the United States to new standards and by insisting on monitoring cuts made by other nations, the administration can say passage of domestic legislation would not put the United States at a competitive disadvantage with other nations, particularly China.

In announcing the deal, even Obama -- who walked in on a meeting of developing nations to insist on an agreement late Friday -- conceded its limitations. "Today we made a meaningful and unprecedented breakthrough here in Copenhagen," he said. But, he added, "It is going to be very hard, and it's going to take some time" to get a legally binding treaty. That, he said, "was not achievable at this conference."

In the deal, spelled out in a three-page document, each country needs only to list its current domestic pledges for emissions reductions and to promise to allow monitoring of their progress. It also outlines steps to help poor countries go green and prepare for the impact of a warming Earth.

But it sparked a rebellion among more vulnerable nations. They said they could not accept an agreement that lacked deep emissions commitments from the industrialized world.

"The science tells us we must act now, and urgently," said Ian Fry, climate-change representative for Tuvalu, which may be submerged by rising seas in a matter of decades. "To use a Biblical allusion, it looks like we're being offered 30 pieces of silver to bargain away our future. Mr. President, our future is not for sale."

The room burst into applause.

European officials, for their part, made it clear that although America's climate-change goals had improved, compared to where they were under the Bush administration, they still were not in line with those of the European Union and Japan.

"This accord is better than no accord, [but] it wasn't a huge step," said European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso. "The level of ambition is honestly not what we were hoping for."

Barroso and Swedish Prime Minister Frederik Reinfeldt said the EU would stick to its target of reducing

emissions 20 percent by 2020, compared to 1990 levels, rather than going for the 30 percent goal they had pledged in the context of an ambitious agreement.

But Obama, as well as many U.S. environmentalists, said this agreement represents a turning point in international climate policy because it means the developing world, which will account for nearly all the emissions growth in coming decades, has joined in committing to cut carbon output.

"The goal was to get the big emitters in the developing world under the tent with some sort of credible monitoring regime," said David Doniger, policy director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's climate center.

In fact, there was almost no deal in Copenhagen at all. The contentious talks appeared to break down at several points over recent days, with rich and poor countries at odds over nearly every issue. A group of developing nations staged a temporary walk out earlier in the week, and on the last day of the summit the talks seemed on the verge of collapse.

Obama had scheduled a private evening meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, whose nation, other leaders have said, poses the greatest challenge to forging a global pact. China had strongly resisted proposals for independent monitoring of each country's claimed emissions cuts, whereas the United States has said such scrutiny is integral to a meaningful deal. Wen had earlier declined to attend a pre-plenary emergency meeting with Obama and other world leaders, sending an aide instead.

But when Obama arrived for his meeting with Wen, he discovered that the Chinese leader was in a meeting with the leaders of India, South Africa and Brazil. Obama opted to join them, although at one point he threatened to walk out if no deal was reached. There, the final stages of the agreement came together, sources close to the talks said, with Obama discussing specifics.

Both the United States and the major developing nations agreed to list their existing pledges to fight climate change, and promised unspecified action to prevent the Earth's temperature from rising by more than 2 degrees Celsius. In addition, they will provide information on their progress, which would be subject to international consultations and analysis.

To seal the deal, however, the United States had to sacrifice its goal of enshrining a global target of reducing greenhouse emissions in half by 2050 -- something developing countries, concerned the impact this would have on their economies, were reluctant to embrace. The deal also does not set a 2010 deadline for reaching a formal treaty, which several nations had sought.

Ned Helme, president of the Center for Clean Air Policy, said the administration made big concessions because it was unwilling to walk away from the deal.

"Failure was not an option," Helme said, "so this deal traded off cutting global emissions in half by 2050 for a better transparency package that insures those promises will be kept."

Yet some environmentalists questioned how a document with an uncertain mandate could provide the foundation for a legally binding agreement.

"This is a sort of 'incomplete, I didn't turn in my term paper,' when it should have gotten a failing grade," said Alden Meyer of the Union of Concerned Scientists. "It's fill in the blanks, fill in the numbers."

Even on the question of financing to help developing countries cope with climate change, which had appeared to be one of the talks' few tangible outcomes, the document was short on specifics. It included \$10 billion in annual funding from rich nations for the next three years but set only an aspirational goal for raising \$100 billion in annual funding by 2020.

"It doesn't say what the level of public financing will be," Meyer added. "It could be 2 percent, with 98 percent coming from the carbon markets."

Throughout the negotiations, Obama officials advocated a strong provision to ensure the United States' economic competitors were cutting emissions, saying it was essential to satisfying senators back home, who have yet to pass climate legislation. In an interview before the deal was reached, Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) said such language would make the outcome "politically acceptable," adding, "That, in turn, will create momentum for passage of legislation."

"It's important that the world knows the Chinese are keeping the promises they are making," Markey said.

The decision to remove a 2010 deadline for reaching a legally binding treaty was significant, because scientists have warned that the longer nations wait to make deep greenhouse gas emission cuts, the harder it will be to avert dangerous climate change.

The deal does include language calling for completing a scientific review of the accord by 2015, the same year the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change will issue a comprehensive assessment of the latest scientific findings on global warming. But the document calls only for "consideration of strengthening the long-term goal" of reducing emissions.

Obama conceded that the commitments included in the deal fell far short of what scientists have said is required to avert dangerous warming.

"We know that they will not be by themselves sufficient to get to where we need to get by 2050," he said. "But I want to be very clear that ultimately this issue is going to be dictated by the science, and the science indicates that we're going to have to take more aggressive steps in the future."