UN climate summit fails amid bitter recriminations between US and Europe

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The United Nation's climate summit broke down at the weekend amid bitter exchanges between developed and developing countries, and between the major powers themselves.

Meeting at The Hague, the two-week international conference comprised representatives from 180 countries. It was to have agreed the implementation of the UN's Kyoto treaty on climate change—drawn up in Japan in 1997. The Japanese protocol had called for the developed nations' 1990 levels of emissions of gases such as carbon dioxide to be cut by around five percent by 2010. It left open how this was to be achieved and what the penalties would be for countries that failed to meet their targets. The Hague summit was supposed to set out exactly what the developed countries should do to reduce emissions of these gases, generally thought to contribute to global warming.

Pressure to reach a settlement has intensified. Social Democrats now run most European governments, in some cases directly in coalition with Greens. The European Union (EU) negotiating team comprised several Green Party ministers and the conference was presided over by Dutch Environment Minister, Jan Pronk.

Recent scientific research has also made more concrete the dangers of global warming and the role played in it by the burning of fossil fuels, particularly oil and coal. In 1988, the UN had established an Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), involving many leading climate scientists. The IPCC report presented to the summit concluded that the dangers were more significant than had been appreciated five years earlier and that the earth may warm up by as much as six degrees Celsius within a century, double the previous estimates.

The IPCC concluded that man's actions have "contributed substantially to the observed warming over the last 50 years". The result could be ever more erratic weather patterns, causing flooding, the spread of diseases like malaria and dengue fever and the eradication of certain forms of animal and plant life.

Many countries have a long way to go to meet their emissions objectives. As a result, the Kyoto treaty permitted countries to achieve their targets not only by directly reducing emissions but also by increasing carbon dioxide absorption, for example through tree planting programmes—so-called "carbon sinks." The treaty also allowed nations to "buy" emission credits from others countries whose emissions were below the stipulated level.

However, scientists now believe that carbon sinks are not as reliable at storing carbon dioxide as previously thought.

Moreover, Kyoto was unable to agree on penalties that could be imposed against those countries that failed to meet their emission-reduction targets. The US, in particular, opposes financial penalties, and for good reason. It is estimated that America would have to cut its emissions by 20-30 percent from expected levels at the end of the decade. Significant sections of big business—most notably the oil companies—vehemently oppose this, arguing that it would represent an unacceptable financial burden and would damage economic growth. The Republican Party is particularly hostile to any concessions by the US, and has blocked ratification of the Kyoto protocol in the Senate.

The standpoint of these big business layers was summed up in the weekly *Washington Times* editorial on November 22. Compliance with the Kyoto targets would mean "massive new energy taxes or draconian rationing schemes" and the "impoverishment of nearly 300 million Americans", it said. The editorial also condemned evidence gathered on global warming as "skewed and politicized data" and described the IPCC as being "suffused with political leftists".

America's chief negotiator at The Hague, Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs Frank Loy, wanted an agreement that could be passed by the Senate, but this would have meant watering down the Kyoto protocols. It appears that the American team were counting on European concerns that a Bush administration would block all progress on the environment, to present their proposals as the best on offer.

Backed by Australia, Canada and Japan, Loy insisted that the US could only meet its targets by using "flexibility mechanisms", such as trading credits and paying for other countries to plant trees. By concentrating on carbon sinks, Washington had hoped to offset the costs associated with making direct cuts in US emissions—and even wanted existing forests and farmland to be taken into account.

The proposal provoked an immediate backlash, as other nations complained it meant no real reduction in emissions. On Tuesday November 21, French President Jacques Chirac, who

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also holds the current presidency of the 15-nation European Union, attacked the US proposals directly. "Each American emits three times more greenhouse gases than a Frenchman," Chirac said. "No country can elude its share of the collective effort." Politicians must oppose "vested interests", Chirac continued, "who profit from wasted energy." Although the French leader did state that if reforestation and the fight against global warming were proven scientifically to be "mutually reinforcing", then carbon sinks should be given due weight.

Chirac's outspoken attack reflects European determination to get a binding agreement on the Kyoto protocols. In addition to environmental concerns that enjoy popular support in Europe, sections of business are insisting that the treaty is concretised. An international drive against global warming promises to be very lucrative for some companies, who would have the opportunity to build “clean” power stations in Asia and Latin America. But most companies are reluctant to commit to the billions of dollars and euros in investment until terms are agreed.

America's stance also earned the anger of many poor and smaller nations, who condemned the proposals as an arrogant example of wealthy nations "buying" their right to pollute. Nigeria's Environment Minister Sani Zangon Daura said the US had caused a "plague of climate change" as harmful as the colonisation of Africa. Small and low-lying island-nations—the most likely victims of rising sea levels as global temperatures increase—had also wanted agreement on compensation and technology transfers.

With the summit near to conclusion, the US-led “umbrella group” was almost completely isolated and Loy was on the receiving end of a custard pie thrown by protestors at a press conference.

On Thursday November 23, in an effort to break the deadlock, Chairman Pronk submitted a compromise proposal, which he said would ensure the "pain will be shared by all groups but also benefits are evenly shared among all groups." Under Pronk's plan, the US would be allowed restricted use of carbons sinks to offset emissions, but investment in nuclear power in developing countries would be excluded from credit trading. Pronk also proposed that the Western countries provide £1billion in aid to help developing countries "adapt" to global warming and install clean energy technology. The Chairman also extended the deadline for agreement to Saturday November 25.

Although both the US and the EU expressed their disappointment with Pronk's plans, they were accepted as the basis for continuing discussions. With both sides keen to come up with some agreement, negotiating teams worked through the night, and by Saturday morning it was announced that the "crunch issues" had been largely resolved.

According to media reports, the US had agreed to scale back its demands on carbon sinks from 300 million tons to 75 million, in return for agreement on unrestricted trading in carbon credits. When the European negotiators took the package back to a plenary session of the EU representatives for formal approval, however, it was rejected. A further offer by the US to scale back to 50 million was rejected, and US sources complained of a new round of "America-bashing".

The Nordic countries were particularly hostile to the compromise package, but US press reports singled out Germany as the main culprit for "switching sides" at the last moment.

With most delegations having already gone home, Pronk was left with no alternative than to declare the conference "suspended". Delegates are to meet again in Bonn in May 2001, but full-blown negotiations are not scheduled before October in Marrakech, Morocco.

The US blamed the EU for the breakdown, and vice versa. Meanwhile, bitter recriminations broke out within the EU itself, particularly between France and Britain. Britain's Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott had played a lead role in the overnight talks with the US. When the compromise package was rejected, Prescott stormed out. He petulantly blamed the EU's chief negotiator, French Environment Minister Dominique Voynet, in the most derisory terms, for scuppering the deal because she was tired, confused and got “cold feet”. Voynet hit back, accusing Prescott of being a male chauvinist who was lashing out because he had been unable to impose his own agenda.

The Prescott/Voynet spat forms part of the growing antagonisms between Europe and the US, with Britain being seen by other EU members as America's stooge. Whilst Britain's anti-European press seized on the row to launch another round of EU-bashing, Prescott was condemned across Europe for breaking EU ranks on behalf of his "US allies".

The failure to reach a compromise with the US reflects the more assertive stance being taken by the EU in defining and insisting upon "European" interests. Interviewed in the French daily newspaper *Libération*, Voynet said that the US bore responsibility for the talk's failure. "For three years we had a dialogue of the deaf: for the United States, the American way of life was not up for negotiation... We started to challenge the United States. It started to move. It is no longer keeping up a position of inflexible arrogance."

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