

Bush administration isolated at Bali climate conference

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The two-week UN-sponsored conference on climate change on the Indonesian island of Bali has been dominated by the intransigence of the Bush administration and the mounting conflicts among the great powers, particularly between the United States and the European Union.

United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the official sponsor of the conference, submitted a document calling on the industrialized nations to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 25 to 40 percent by 2020, compared to 1990 levels. The document had wide support among the delegates, but required unanimous approval.

The Bush administration delegation, virtually isolated among the 12,000 in attendance on Bali, flatly rejected any practical measures to combat global warming, blocking the adoption of numerical targets for the reduction of greenhouse emissions. The chief US representative, Harlan L. Watson, declared Wednesday, “The reality in this business is that once numbers appear in the text, it prejudices the outcome and will tend to drive the negotiations in one direction.”

The US government also called for removing language that calls for “sufficient, predictable, additional and sustainable financial resources” to help poor nations adapt to climate change.

Bush environmental advisor James Connaughton sought to substitute verbal salutes to the UN panel for any action, saying the IPCC has “already done great work. We should declare the IPCC a success and move forward ...”

A second numerical goal set out in the UN draft, calling for a reduction in global emissions to no more than half the 2000 level by 2050, was opposed not only by the Bush administration but by China and India as well, since that goal applied to all countries, not just those already heavily industrialized.

Even as back-room negotiations continued on a face-saving conference declaration, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon conceded that there would be no set targets due to opposition from the US, Canada and Japan. The proposed targets had proven “too ambitious,” he said, although he

conceded that “the situation is so desperately serious that any delay could push us past the tipping point, beyond which the ecological, financial and human costs would increase dramatically.” The alternative to an agreement was “oblivion,” he said.

The World Meteorological Organization issued a report Thursday underscoring the growing evidence of global warming. The 10-year period 1998-2007 was the warmest on record, and “very likely the warmest period for at least the last 1,000 or 1,300 years,” according to WMO secretary general Michel Jarraud.

The WMO reported that the world’s average surface temperature had risen by .74 degrees Celsius, or 1.33 degrees Fahrenheit, since the start of the 20th century. A fall of five degrees would return the world to a new Ice Age, while a rise of the same amount would melt the icecaps, drowning much of the low-lying land where hundreds of millions of people now live.

The UN called the Bali conference to begin the process of developing a replacement for the Kyoto Protocol, the environmental agreement reached in 1997 that has been effectively torpedoed by US opposition. While the Clinton administration signed the protocol, it never submitted the treaty for ratification by Congress because of Republican opposition.

Bush repudiated Kyoto shortly after entering the White House, and for most of its seven years in office the Bush administration refused even to admit that global warming was a reality, in deference to heavy lobbying by corporate interests, particularly the big energy companies. White House appointees even sought to impose political censorship on scientists at NASA and other government agencies whose research shed light on the extent and speed of climate change.

European representatives criticized the Bush administration’s refusal, at least until this year, to concede the overwhelming scientific case for the danger that global warming will cause rising seas, catastrophic changes in weather patterns, and species extinctions.

Stavros Dimas, the European Union's environment commissioner, said, "Logic requires that we listen to the science. I would expect others to follow that logic."

Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, the top science advisor to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, told the *Washington Post* that he did not understand how the United States can praise the IPCC "and when it comes to something like this, block it." The Bush administration "is just ignoring" the scientific evidence, he said, and opposing any practical measures to deal with climate change. "An agreement on nothing is not a good agreement," he concluded.

Some European officials threatened a boycott of an upcoming meeting on environmental issues of the world's major economies, called by the White House and set for Honolulu, Hawaii.

Sigmar Gabriel, the German environment minister, said the European Union would not attend the Honolulu meeting next month. "If we will not find a solution here in Bali, I cannot see what we should negotiate in the major economies meetings," he said. "If you want to organize a road map, you should know the destination."

His Danish counterpart, Connie Hedegaard, told reporters that an emissions-reduction target of 25 to 40 percent by 2020 was "one of the bottom lines the European Union has got."

The timing of the Bali conference and the timeframe set out by its sponsors underscores the degree to which the Bush administration has become an international outcast on the issue of global warming. With Kyoto essentially rendered a dead letter by US opposition, the conference organizers sought to initiate an early replacement for it by a new protocol to be negotiated in 2009—i.e., during the first year of Bush's successor in the White House.

The vast majority of the delegations at Bali clearly hope that the Democratic Party will form the next US administration. This was demonstrated by the attention given to former vice president Al Gore, who flew directly to Indonesia from the ceremony in Oslo, Norway, where he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on the environment.

Gore was accorded the status of a virtual president-in-exile, and his address to the conference was remarkable for its explicit condemnation of the policy of his own government, and the ovation he received for doing so.

"My own country, the United States, is principally responsible for obstructing progress here in Bali," he declared, promising that there would be a change after the 2008 US presidential election.

"Over the next two years the United States is going to be somewhere where it is not now. You must anticipate that," he said, adding, "I must tell you candidly that I cannot

promise that the person who is elected will have the position I expect they will have, but I can tell you I believe it is quite likely." He urged the delegates to "negotiate around this enormous obstacle, this elephant in the room."

A US environmentalist, Philip Clapp, deputy managing director of the Pew Environment Group, the conservation arm of the Pew charitable trusts, told the *New York Times* that the atmosphere at Bali was "of a family standing around the bedside of an expiring administration."

However sharp their conflicts with the lame duck White House, however, the measures proposed by the European powers, Gore, and sections of the Democratic Party are completely insufficient to address the dangers of global warming and other forms of environmental degradation produced by the anarchic and unplanned operations of world capitalism.

It is intrinsically impossible to develop a serious fight against global warming and other looming environmental disasters within the framework of the present world political and economic order. Such efforts are inevitably shipwrecked on the two great obstacles to all human progress in the 21st century: the division of the world into rival nation-states, and the domination of economic life by a tiny financial aristocracy of bankers, billionaires and corporate CEOs.

The recent adherence of Australia to the Kyoto accord, for instance, is driven not so much by concern for the fate of humanity as the lucrative markets that have been created for carbon trading and the production of energy-saving technology. There are billions in profits to be made, but the market mechanisms advocated by Gore & Co. will do little to prevent an environmental doomsday.

Only a socialist perspective, which subordinates the operation of the world economy to human needs, as democratically determined by the people themselves, not corporate profits, can provide a way forward to resolve the crisis in the environment.



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