

Climate talks promise little, deliver less

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Delegates from over 180 nations converged Monday on Cancun, Mexico, as a two-week-long United Nations climate change conference commenced. They were joined by a swarm of industry representatives, environmental activists and media, all together numbering near 15,000. But what the conference boasted in terms of attendance was hardly matched by any hope for a comprehensive strategy to address climate change.

Leading up to the conference, key participants made clear that a binding agreement was off the negotiating table in Cancun. Top US climate envoy Todd Stern explained prior to his arrival, “It is now widely understood that a legal treaty this year is not in the cards.”

Christina Figueres, the head of the UN body conducting the conference, admitted much the same, remarking that “Cancun will not solve everything,” and governments should focus instead on pragmatic solutions. Observers have highlighted a few areas where narrow agreements are still possible—though by no means assured—at this year’s meeting: intellectual property rights for green-technology transfer, anti-deforestation incentives and funding mechanisms for aiding developing countries.

However, just three days into the talks, deep divisions already had emerged, even with this scaled-back agenda. BNA reports that a group of African delegates, dissatisfied with inadequate financing proposals from industrialized countries, threatened to walk out of working group meetings Monday. The lead Bolivian negotiator said a group of Latin American delegates were prepared to do the same.

Kevin Conrad, the Papua New Guinea delegate, bluntly questioned whether the entire UN climate negotiation process “is growing increasingly irrelevant.” Patricia Espinosa, the foreign minister of the host country, Mexico, conceded to the press, “I

cannot say this is the kind of opening I hoped for.”

Negotiations took another turn toward a complete breakdown Wednesday as Japanese officials categorically ruled out extending the Kyoto Protocol. Japanese Environment Minister Ryu Matsumoto declared, “Whatever happens, under any kind of conditions, we do not accept a second commitment, period.” The protocol, which sets limits for greenhouse gas emissions in industrialized countries and provides a mechanism for purchasing emission credits from developing countries, will sunset in 2012 if no action is taken. Many delegations, particularly from poorer countries, support prolonging the Kyoto Protocol.

Explaining his opposition, Matsumoto continued, “Without the active participation of the two biggest emitters—namely China and the US—it’s not a global effort.” The US signed but never ratified the treaty; China is not bound by any emission reduction targets under the protocol. In staking out this position, Japan is asserting an unwillingness to cede any competitive advantage to its rivals.

Similarly, the United States is at pains to ensure that its relative position is strengthened to the maximum extent possible through these negotiations. The US delegation is demanding, for example, that China accept transparency and accountability measures and commit to capping greenhouse gas emissions.

The European Union, for its part, has indicated agreement with the emphasis on establishing a system to measure, report and verify emissions, particularly with respect to China. But it also seeks to pressure the US into accepting a larger burden for mitigating climate change, and thereby expanding markets for relatively mature European green-tech industry.

Meanwhile, developing countries continue to emphasize the responsibility of their industrialized counterparts to share technology and distribute funding to help offset the cost of climate impacts.

These and numerous other longstanding divisions among the national representatives have widened since the previous climate summit in Copenhagen last December. Prior to that meeting, hopes, though not soaring, nonetheless still existed for coming to an agreement on a new comprehensive and legally enforceable treaty. This was reflected in the attendance of over 120 heads of state at the conference (in contrast to Cancun, where only a handful plan to attend, mostly from small island nations). Nonetheless the Copenhagen summit ended in debacle: in place of a binding treaty there was a weak three-page political commitment that threatens to be scrapped in Cancun.

The prospects for unified global action have soured in the interim, as efforts to pass climate change legislation stalled in a number of countries, notably the US, Canada, Australia and Japan. Underlying these failures is the deteriorating global economic atmosphere in which national governments are scrambling to make their home industries more competitive—both by lowering benefits and wages of workers and scrapping plans for increased environmental protection. In this context, the pleas for delegates to go beyond their own national interests and act in the interests of all humanity ring ever more hollow.



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