Environment: UN hopes to pluck a deal from Copenhagen’s chaos
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Few meetings of world leaders have been as chaotic and ill-coordinated as last month’s climate change summit in Copenhagen.
Governments were hoping to forge a global agreement that would form the basis for a new treaty on climate change – the first that would oblige both developed and developing countries to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

Hopes of a truly global agreement were dashed at the last minute, however, when a small number of countries – chiefly Venezuela, Bolivia and Sudan – refused to participate, and were able to hold up the proceedings amid shouting and recriminations.
But the scenes of chaos and the widespread condemnation that followed disguised the substantial progress that was made.
World leaders came away from Denmark with an agreement by all of the biggest economies – including developing countries such as China, India and Brazil – to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, to limit global warming to no more than 2 degrees Celsius, and to provide funding that would enable poor nations to adopt low-carbon technologies and cope with the effects of climate change.

This accord fulfilled most of the aims that the United Nations had set in advance of the Copenhagen summit.

Barack Obama, US president, called the accord “historic” in bringing developed and developing countries together, and said it was a “first step” towards a new global treaty on warming.

There were two big gaps in the accord, however. Countries did not set out in full their commitments on cutting emissions, and have until the end of this month to do so. They also failed to set a deadline for signing a new global climate treaty.

The first question should be resolved soon. A flurry of diplomatic activity began shortly after exhausted negotiators finished their brief end-of-year break, with countries preparing to submit formal commitments on emissions curbs.

All of the main developed economies have already committed to cutting their greenhouse gas emissions in the next decade – the US, for instance, has said it will cut its emissions 17 per cent by 2020 from 2005 levels, though this depends on legislation passing Congress. All of the biggest developing countries have agreed to curb the future growth of their greenhouse gas emissions – for instance, China, the world’s biggest emitter, will ensure that its emissions per unit of economic output fall 40 to 45 per cent by 2020. This will allow emissions to rise in absolute terms, but represent a substantial fall compared with “business as usual”.

Setting out these commitments into a formal document will be the task of the next few weeks. Although there will be haggling over details, because most countries have already made loud public commitments to their emissions targets it will be difficult for them to wriggle out of them. Yvo de Boer, the top official on climate change at the UN, says he is hopeful: “They made these commitments publicly, so how can they back out of them now?”

Many, though, have set out a range of possible targets. The European Union, for instance, has said it would cut emissions 20 per cent by 2020 from 1990 levels, but would increase this to 30 per cent if other countries also agree to ambitious goals. Countries with a range of targets will face pressure from the UN and others to make the top end of their range the formal target.

The second question left hanging from Copenhagen, of when countries will negotiate a formal global treaty on climate change, is harder to answer. The UN is continuing negotiations this year and though the exact timetable of meetings is still to be settled, a big meeting is likely in June. Negotiators hope to conclude the talks by the end of 2010, when a summit will be held in Mexico City.
But the fractious negotiations at Copenhagen have led some countries to argue that the UN process itself must be reformed if progress is to be achieved. Under the UN’s rules on climate negotiations, any agreement must be passed unanimously by every country present. At last month’s summit, a small number of leaders including Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia disrupted the process by railing against capitalism, and refusing to allow the UN to adopt the agreement.

After the Copenhagen summit, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon acknowledged that some changes to the process would be necessary, but the form those could take is not yet clear.

More importantly, senior officials in the EU are concerned that China might seek to block progress towards a climate treaty. Although China has made public commitments to emissions curbs, and voiced support for efforts to combat climate change, Beijing is known to be wary of signing up to a legally binding treaty, and vetoed agreement on certain key aspects of the Copenhagen accord, including a commitment already agreed by developed countries to cut their emissions 80 per cent by 2050. Privately, some developed country officials also suspected that the wrecking antics of the small number of objectors at Copenhagen – some of which, such as Sudan, have strong ties to China – had Beijing’s approval. If that is the case, negotiators now face a formidable task to lead the world to a climate change treaty by the end of 2010.