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Rifts cloud start of UN climate talks

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South African President Jacob Zuma speaks during the opening ceremony of the climate conference in the city of Durban, South Africa, Monday, Nov. 28, 2011. AP Photo/Schalk van Zuydam

The UN's annual climate conference began in the steamy South African city of Durban on Monday amid signs of deep discord over how countries should curb their carbon emissions.

The gathering comes 12 months before the expiry of the main provisions of the 1997 **Kyoto protocol**, the world's only comprehensive treaty that legally obliges countries to cut emissions.

Developing countries, exempt from the pact, insist the wealthy countries that signed up for the first phase of Kyoto must make fresh pledges to cut emissions at the conference, which runs until Dec. 9.

"If Durban puts off a legally binding agreement, many of our small island states will be literally and figuratively doomed," said Dessima Williams, chair of a **group of island states** that has long pushed loudly for a new global pact.

But only the European Union and a small group of other industrialized countries have said they were willing to consider a second phase of Kyoto. Even they say they would not do so unless all countries agreed to consider some form of legally binding reductions at some point, including China, which overtook the U.S. to become the world's biggest emitter in 2007.

"The world economy of 2011 is simply not like it was in 1997 when the Kyoto protocol was done," said Connie Hedegaard, EU climate commissioner.

EU countries accounted for just 11 per cent of global emissions, she said, while China contributed 24 per cent and had higher emissions per head than some European nations. "It's clear to everyone you cannot have a strong enough international agreement if [it includes] only the EU with our 11 per cent of global emissions, supported by a few other countries. What about the remaining 80-something per cent? When will they follow?" she said.

But at Durban's sprawling convention centre there was little evidence of a shift within the two countries whose differences have long dogged the negotiations — China, and the U.S., which signed but

never ratified the Kyoto pact. “I’m not sure that the issue of legal form will be resolved here, or needs to be resolved here,” said the U.S. deputy envoy for climate change, Jonathan Pershing.

He pointed to the last UN summit in Cancún, Mexico, where countries accounting for some 80 per cent of global emissions formally agreed to make **voluntary pledges** to curb their carbon pollution up to 2020, without a legally binding treaty.

“To my way of thinking, that’s an enormous way forward in solving the problem,” he said. However, Su Wei, Chinese negotiator, told state radio that while the EU had put forward a proposal to extend Kyoto, “the prospects are not very optimistic” at Durban.

The possibility of the summit collapsing into acrimonious disagreement is weighing on its South African hosts. “With sound leadership, nothing is impossible here in Durban,” said Jacob Zuma, president.



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Kyoto protocol at risk in Durban

By Pilita Clark



Floods devastated areas around Bangkok in November. Many nations are struggling with financial conditions that make dealing with climate change seem a low priority

People have been talking about the death of the Kyoto protocol for at least a decade.

But this week, as thousands of people head to South Africa for the latest United Nations climate summit, which starts in Durban on Friday, fears for the pact's future are once again widespread.

meeting will take place could not be more challenging," says Juan Costa Climent, global climate change and sustainability services leader at Ernst & Young.

Nick Robins, head of HSBC's climate change group, is equally pessimistic. "Ambition levels are low and policy differences among industrialised and emerging economies remain acute," he says.

The potential for "high-profile" clashes at Durban, over everything from the Kyoto protocol to climate finance, "remains high".

Indeed, economically and politically, the situation ahead of this year's annual summit is arguably among the worst since the treaty was first agreed in 1997 in the Japanese city that gave it its name.

Yet it is a critical time for the treaty, whose first phase commits wealthy countries to cut their emissions by nearly 5 per cent from 1990 levels, but only until the end of next year.

Global energy-related emissions of carbon dioxide jumped 5 per cent in 2010 to record levels, according to the International Energy Agency, despite the 2008-09 banking and economic crisis.

Also, for the first time in many years, there was an increase in the world economy's carbon intensity, or emissions per unit of gross domestic product, say consultants at PwC.

"Instead of moving too slowly in the right direction, we are now moving in the wrong direction," says the professional services firm, explaining there will now need to be carbon intensity cuts of at least 4.8 per cent every year until 2050 if global temperature increases are to be kept to no more than 2C above pre-industrial levels. It had been hoped a second phase of the Kyoto pact, obliging countries to agree a fresh round of emissions reductions, would have been negotiated by now.

But efforts to do that have failed since the protocol entered force in late 2005, most spectacularly at the 2009 Copenhagen summit, when world leaders from Barack Obama, the US president, down left the talks without agreeing a legally binding deal.

Now, a year before that 2012 expiration date, hardly any prominent leaders are expected in Durban, not least because many are struggling with volatile financial conditions that make climate change seem a low priority.

The global economy is still recovering from the last downturn just as an unfolding eurozone debt disaster threatens to wreak further havoc. That bodes ill for another important 2012 deadline concerning the money that rich countries have pledged to give poorer ones to help the latter deal with climate change.

At the Copenhagen summit, wealthy countries promised \$30bn a year in "fast-start" funding to poorer countries by the end of 2012, and then scale it up to \$100bn a year by 2020.

Although non-profit bodies, such as the International Institute for Environment and Development, have calculated that \$25.5bn has been raised for fast-start funding, they say most of it has been promised for projects that counteract climate change, whereas poorer countries want funds to help them adapt to it.

And with the final year of the fast-start funding phase approaching, they worry that rich nations are showing little of the commitment required to reach the \$100bn a year target.

On top of this, the US is heading into a presidential election year in which Republican contenders are unsure if climate change exists, let alone whether the US should sign up to a global treaty to tackle it. Texas governor Rick Perry has said "a substantial number of scientists ... have manipulated data", while Minnesota's Michele Bachmann called global warming a hoax.

A year ahead of next year's presidential election, it seems impossible for the Obama administration to offer much, even if it wished to do so.

There is little new in this. The US signed the Kyoto protocol in 1997 but did not ratify it, after many in Congress argued it would be wrong to commit to a deal that obliged the US to lower its emissions, but not big emerging rivals such as China.

China and all developing countries were exempted from emissions reductions when the Kyoto treaty was agreed. But China's insistence that only rich countries should face binding obligations has made it unpopular with countries that ratified the treaty, especially since China overtook the US as the world's biggest emitter in 2007.

At last year's Cancún climate summit in Mexico, Japan stunned the conference by saying that, even though it hosted the birth of the Kyoto protocol, it would not support a second commitment period.

Russia and Canada have since made similar suggestions.

That has left the European Union, and a smattering of other countries, as the only potential members of the Kyoto Club. Even the EU, which has long been at the head of climate policymaking, now says it will only support a second phase of the treaty so long as all countries – including the US and China – agree to a plan in which all make some form of binding commitments by a certain date.

Connie Hedegaard, EU climate commissioner, says developed countries could still do more than developing ones in such a scenario.

But the world has to move beyond the “traditional 20th-century thinking” that divided the world into a rich north and poor south, she adds.

There seems little sign that either the US or China is willing to sign up to even this modest EU proposal.

China and other developing countries continue to insist there must be a second Kyoto commitment period for rich countries.

They have even threatened to withdraw support for measures such as the Clean Development Mechanism, the Kyoto protocol scheme that allows companies in wealthy countries to offset carbon emissions by buying credits generated from carbon reduction projects in poorer nations.

The EU has itself added to growing fears of confrontation, because from January it is going to start charging all airlines flying into its airspace for their carbon pollution.

This move, though approved years ago, has prompted a backlash from many countries.

In a statement issued after a meeting about the Durban summit this month, the Basic group of countries – Brazil, South Africa, India and China – declared that “unilateral” measures such as the EU's emissions trading scheme, “jeopardise the effort of international co-operation in addressing climate change”.

So what happens if, as seems likely, the Durban summit ends in acrimonious failure? Can the UN climate negotiations proceed from that point? Or will it be time to give up and concede defeat?

Tim Baines, senior associate at Norton Rose, the legal firm, says: “I think barring all but a completely catastrophic outcome on Durban, and assuming the Kyoto question remained unresolved, there probably would continue to be discussions in relation to this issue next year.”

But, he adds: “If there was a complete failure along the lines of Copenhagen, then it might fall into doubt as to whether the [UN climate framework] should remain the central process for finding a climate change agreement.”