

Time running out on climate talks

The UN climate conference struggled to reach a deal that would shield the world from impacts of climate change on Saturday, as most delegates have left the coastal city of Durban.

South African Foreign Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, the conference president, opened a high-level meeting among ministers to discuss the latest draft of a long-term agreement that only arrived in the morning, a time when parties were scheduled to commence the final plenary session.

Shouldering the task of determining the fate of the Kyoto Protocol and creating a global pledge for emissions cuts, the conference earlier failed to conclude on Friday evening. Major emitters China, the US and India have been resistant to commit to the European Union (EU) plan for a legal framework that obliges countries to commit to reduce emissions.

As most delegates have now left Durban, ministers and envoys were forced to pack a small meeting room at the International Conference Center to discuss details on the draft and to decide whether to agree on each negotiated point.

All members of developed nations, also known as the umbrella bloc, as well as many Latin American countries attended the meeting with Indonesia and a small group of African countries. A delegate who was present at the meeting said the closed forum agreed to move forward with the negotiation despite the absence of many other country representatives.

"This is so frustrating. The lack of leadership from the president has put us in this chaos," Guatemala negotiator Rita Mashaan Rossell said.

A veteran to the annual climate convention, Rita said this was the worst climate meeting she had ever attended.

The conference opened this year in the shadow of a global recession impacting the US, several EU countries and Japan. Even before the talks started, Japan, Russia and Canada had said that they would not sign a second commitment to the Kyoto treaty, the only treaty that binds developed countries to control emissions is due to expire in 2012.

The conference has seen the EU attempting to make a breakthrough against a backdrop of years of impasse on a legally binding agreement. A deal was within reach with the support of small island states (AOSIS), less developed countries (LDC) and the African bloc supporting the plan. But the alliance failed to clinch a deal with the three largest polluters, which together contribute up to 40 percent of global carbon emissions.

The US said while it was committed to the global fight against climate change it would not agree to any legally binding scheme.

China said it would only step forward with the EU roadmap if it was considered a developing country, while India has repeatedly complained the timetable proposed by the EU for the road map was impractical. Indonesia's presidential special envoy for climate change, Rachmat Witoelar, said it would take an inspiring move to salvage the ailing conference.

"The conference president should consider her steps wisely. It may also take into account the representative principle in which the forum could go on as long as delegates from country groups in the conference are present," he said, calling the countries to take the climate deal as a moral action instead of only securing their economic and political interests.