

Expectations low in absence of key leaders



Global justice: Activists push an inflatable globe during a “Global March” as part of the People’s Summit for Social and Environmental Justice in Defense of the Commons, a parallel event during the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on Wednesday. AP/Felipe Dana

The United Nations’ Conference on Sustainable Development, commonly referred to as Rio+20, kicked off here on Wednesday with expectations subdued due to the absence of key leaders from developed countries and a weak communique draft. Embattled by domestic issues pertinent to the global economic crisis, leaders of developed countries such as the US and Germany have decided not to attend, dashing the hopes of many who are demanding serious rethinking of the current global economic development model pioneered by developed countries.

Emil Salim, who is on Indonesia’s presidential advisory board, told The Jakarta Post that the absence of a high-level delegation from the US meant that many contentious issues did not go through the usual fierce battles. The first Rio Earth summit in 1992 paved the way for a global treaty on biodiversity, and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gases, which is due to expire this year. The Rio+20 moniker is a nod to the 1992 summit.

Emil said that one focus which remained a top priority was the acknowledgment of the principle of common and differentiated responsibility in the final outcome of the summit. “It could have been worse. The G20 meeting in Los Cabos, Mexico, produced a new momentum for collaborative effort to improve the world economy. That news brought hope to everyone here.”

Leaders of the G20, a multilateral grouping of the world’s largest economies, gathered in Los Cabos earlier this week to formulate joint efforts to control the global crisis. Leaders issued their strongest ever statements on their collective commitment to improve the global economy following a positive outcome from the Greek election, in which fiscal reform parties won a majority. Discounting the absence of key leaders, diplomats from 190 countries agreed on a draft communique titled “The Future We Want”, outlining inspirational visions in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa confirmed that the final communique had been completed. The 283-paragraph document was ready for leaders to adopt on Thursday. Environmentalists complained that the agreement was too weak for a variety of reasons; ultimately, however, for failing to come up with a common definition of green growth. The draft also failed to define clear goals, let alone time frames toward accomplishing them. According to a source familiar with the issue, no agreement was reached among the diplomats on provisions that demanded governments phase out fossil-fuel subsidies, despite a pledge by G20 countries to eliminate them. Phasing out fossil-fuel subsidies by 2020 would reduce annual global energy demand by 5 percent and carbon dioxide emissions by nearly 6 percent, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA). Diplomats from developing countries were wary of the motives behind the endorsement of the concept by many developed countries.

In spite of its shortcomings, the communique secured commendable demands for a green economy. It states that countries must not create new trade barriers, impose conditionalities, widen technology gaps or exacerbate the technological dependence of developing countries on developed countries, or restrict the policy space for countries to pursue their own paths toward sustainable development. The draft communique also demands that countries set out an alternative-energy path and calls for the transfer of technologies — an achievement made after a long and hard-fought battle between developing and rich countries. With the conclusion of the communique, Rio+20 secretary-general Sha Zukang told the conference that the draft contained “a lot of action points”. He noted that the agreement was the result of compromises by all parties. “As with all negotiations, there will be some countries that feel the text could be more ambitious; or others who feel their own proposals could be better reflected. But, let’s be clear: Multilateral negotiations require give and take.”