

Grim mood despite EU proposal

As the Durban climate conference begins, participating nations have yet to agree on a legally binding commitment to reduce emissions. Twelve heads of state and 130 ministers face an impasse on the future of a global framework to reduce emissions as they meet for the high level segment of the 17th UN Climate Conference (COP17) on Tuesday afternoon (local time) in the South African city.

The Kyoto Protocol faces an unlikely future unless the nations accept a new road map from the European Union (EU) that requires all countries, both rich and poor, to make legal commitments to emission reduction. A new treaty must be agreed to by 2015 and enacted by 2020, delivering binding commitments from all countries to curb emissions. Having rejected an extension of the Kyoto treaty that would only regulate developed countries, Japan expressed its faith on the new deal along with China, which recently broke its silence by committing to cut its emissions by 2020.

China, however, said it would only accept the new treaty under the condition that it be considered a developing country. "Other countries should respect the founding principles of the existing agreements that recognize that wealthy nations must do more since they are responsible for most of the greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change, Chinese delegation head Xie Zhenhua said as reported by Xinhua on Tuesday.

"China has expressed its stance on many negotiating occasions and as I said just now, very clearly, we will accept a legally binding arrangement, with conditions." The conditions include new carbon-cutting pledges by rich nations in the second commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol; a fast launch of the Green Climate Fund under a supervisory regime; implementing a consensus for adaptation, technology transfer, transparency, capability building; and other points agreed upon in previous conferences as well as appraising developed countries' commitment during the first period of the Kyoto Protocol.

India, the US and Indonesia remain skeptical on the new road map. While India said it would not commit to any legally binding emission reduction targets, the US said it would not sign any deal without more details on what the treaty would look like. Indonesia's chief negotiator, Rachmat Witoelar, said the country supported extending the Kyoto Protocol since there was little substance in the new proposal. Rachmat likened the Kyoto Protocol to a car owned by a group that was considering buying a replacement. "We still support a second commitment to Kyoto," he said. Coming into force in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol is the only treaty curbing global emissions, stipulating that 37 industrialized countries and the European community must reduce greenhouse gas emissions to an average of 5 percent of their 1990 levels. The treaty will expire next year unless participating nations agree to extend it.

Rachmat said talks on a new deal might not be finalized in Durban, making it likely that the conference would only agree to implement the Green Climate Fund. Raised during the previous conference in Cancun, Mexico, the Green Climate Fund scheme mandates that countries provide up to US\$100 billion annually by 2020. Despite an institutional frameworks that has already been settled, parties are still negotiating on the mechanism to generate the funds. Debate has been rife on how governments and private institutions should carry the burden of funding the initiative. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opened the high-level meeting with a call to realize what was agreed to in Cancun. "Assisting the vulnerable is both an obligation and a smart investment in a sustainable future," he said. To avoid a stalemate on the Kyoto treaty, Ban urged parties to "carefully consider" the proposals that were advanced in Durban. Elliot Diringer from the US-based Center for Energy and Climate Solutions said it would be difficult to imagine how the climate fund could operate if the standoff on the legally binding commitment was not avoided.

"It would be difficult to deliver the fund or further progress on the other operational, in transparency, technology and adaptation, without some political consensus on those legal issues. I have a hard time envisioning the conference would just agreeing on the climate fund without a proper and balance package," he said.