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Papua New Guinea leading developing nations on protecting earth's atmosphere

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MONTREAL (AP) - Developing countries not bound by greenhouse gas emissions reductions under a global accord are still determined to do something meaningful to protect the earth's atmosphere - and Papua New Guinea appears to be leading the way.

The South Pacific island introduced a contentious proposal - backed by many powerful countries, including those belonging to the European Union, Australia and Japan - before the UN Climate Change conference in Montreal which has created a lot of buzz.

Only the top 35 industrialized countries that signed the 140-country Kyoto Protocol - including Canada - are required to cut emissions to 5.2 per cent below their 1990 levels, between 2008 and 2012.

In the week before the Montreal conference, which opened Monday and closes on Dec. 9, Papua New Guinea was preparing to evacuate hundreds of people living in the low-lying Carteret atoll, which is sinking below the Pacific because of rising water levels.

Many scientists believe rising seas are due to global warming, which is in part exacerbated by greenhouse gases.

On Wednesday, Papua New Guinea introduced a proposal that would financially reward developing countries for preserving rain forests, which produce oxygen to help clean the air. Some scientists believe deforestation contributes to about 20 per cent of greenhouse gases.

Protecting a rain forest that was due to be cut down, the Papua New Guinea delegation said, was just as crucial as cleaning up a gas-spewing factories and developing clean energy sources.

"We have joined with many like-minded developing countries that may be prepared to begin, on a voluntary basis, reducing our carbon emissions from deforestation, subject to the creation of meaningful incentives for developing countries to undertake, or strengthen efforts, to address climate change," Papua New Guinea's Environment Minister William Duma told the UN conference.

Robert Aisi, Papua New Guinea's ambassador to the United Nations, said Thursday that he had been getting "generally positive" feedback, but that consultations had just begun.

"Let's be very frank; this is just a start," he said. "Part of the proposal is to work out where the money would come from. I would hope that we can come up with a mechanism."

One of the mechanisms under Kyoto, which went into effect in February, allows a system of bartering carbon emissions. If Germany, for example, is reluctant to clean up a particularly lucrative, but dirty power plant, it can still earn credit toward its mandatory emissions cuts by investing in sustainable technology in another country - or, say, buying up a slice of forest in Papua New Guinea and not tearing down the trees.

The United States, which produces one-fourth of the world's pollution, refused to join Kyoto. U.S. President George W. Bush said it would harm the country's economy and his delegates at the conference insist the White House will not be a part of any mandatory emissions cuts.

Aisi said that while Washington had not backed his proposal, "they haven't said no."

When Bush pulled out of Kyoto, his administration said it would help fight climate change by saving tropical forests, noted John Niles of the Washington, D.C., based Climate Community and Biodiversity Alliance.

He said Kyoto signatories are now realizing that the decision to exclude reforestation from Kyoto funding was a mistake.

"Papua New Guinea made the convention realize that it forgot to deal with 20 per cent of the emissions," Niles said.

Papua New Guinea has the world's third-largest tropical forest and as an island-nation is particularly vulnerable to climate change.

Minister Duma said emissions cuts by industrialized countries alone can't prevent global warming. He said tropical deforestation is "the single largest sector for carbon emissions within the developing world - up to 20 per cent of global carbon emissions during the 1990s."

While developing countries are not legally bound by Kyoto - including the big polluters China and India - they are still launching initiatives to fight climate change, said Rafael Senga of the World Wildlife Fund in the Philippines.

"They can feel it, and are actually experiencing the impact of climate change," he said.

While Papua New Guinea can count on the support of a number of countries, the proposal is still being debated within developed countries Senga says.

"Its a contentious issue," he said. "Papua New Guinea must be credited for being creative in its approach and taking a pro-active stance in trying to find ways to combat climate change."