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Issuing a Bold Challenge to the U.S. Over Climate



U.N. TALKS Kevin Conrad, right, representing Papua New Guinea last month.

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For 15 years, United Nations talks aimed at fixing a faltering 1992 climate treaty have provided little drama. But at the latest session last month on the Indonesian island of Bali, Kevin Conrad, a young man representing one of the world's least influential nations, Papua New Guinea, gained a worldwide spotlight as he faced down the sole superpower, the United States.

It was during the final formal plenary, which was crammed with observers, journalists and officials from more than 180 countries. The American negotiators had objected to language inserted in a document at the last minute by developing countries led by China and India. A swell of boos and jeers built.

After a long sequence of polite criticisms from developing countries over the sudden diplomatic logjam at the very end of two draining weeks, it was Mr. Conrad's turn. "I would ask the United States, we ask for your leadership," he said. "But if for some reason you're not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us. Please get out of the way."

The room erupted in applause, and within minutes the lead American representative, Paula J. Dobriansky, dropped the objection and said, "We will go forward and join consensus today."

Nearly every news report — many are now on YouTube — focused on Mr. Conrad's bold comment as a nudge that got the sleeping giant in the global greenhouse to move a little.

But what happened was not that simple, Mr. Conrad said recently, in his first in-depth interview since the close of the talks. The American delegation, in a way, was “set up” by other countries to take the blame, he said, adding that his prime goal was not to embarrass the United States but to keep the negotiations from getting derailed.

Divisions and confusion within the negotiating bloc of developing countries, which has long gone by the name the Group of 77 and China, were as much the cause of the diplomatic logjam as anything else, he said. Interviews with several other negotiators and observers supported his view.

“There was a certain feeling that maybe the U.S. could be the fall guy for this whole thing, that if G-77 couldn’t resolve its own issues, if it just held the line on a position they already knew the U.S. rejected, that the U.S. would be the one that stepped up and had to take the flak for collapsing the whole thing,” he said. “From Papua New Guinea’s standpoint, we couldn’t accept that.”

Mr. Conrad said the potential breakdown in the session’s final hours was particularly vexing to him because New Guinea and other forested tropical countries were finally getting attention for a proposal of payments by rich countries for preserving tropical forests. Deforestation currently contributes about a fifth of carbon dioxide emissions worldwide.

The boos for the United States, and cheers for Mr. Conrad, appeared to reflect widespread feelings, built over seven years, that the Bush administration had stalled progress in curbing greenhouse gases even as it claimed to be leading the effort.

In fact, Mr. Conrad’s statement was an intentional ironic echo of one made by another American official, James L. Connaughton, the chairman of the White House council on environmental quality, who had been quoted by Reuters earlier in the week as saying: “We will lead, we will continue to lead. But leadership also requires others to fall in line and follow.”

Mr. Conrad, 39, was born in the United States to Papuan parents but grew up in Wewak on New Guinea’s northern coast. He studied finance at top American universities, worked in investment banking and lives with his family in the New York City area. Besides representing New Guinea in climate talks, he runs the Rainforest Coalition, a group formed by tropical countries seeking compensation for the benefits of not cutting their forests.

In the interview, which can be seen on video (and commented on) at nytimes.com/dotearth, Mr. Conrad stressed the need for continued focus on cutting emissions wherever they come from, rather than on countries tussling for advantage, as was largely the case in Bali.

“I think collectively we as humanity have become more mature in this climate battle, and we understand collectively that we’ve got to turn off all the emissions sources in order to win,” he said. “The climate doesn’t know whether it came from a factory or from Papua New Guinea’s deforestation. We’ve really got to get all hands on deck and tackle all of the issues.”

He added: “If we can deliver sustainable revenues to communities living in rural areas of tropical countries that are deforesting simply to exist, then we have sort of a win-win-win proposition.”

He said the rich-poor divide in the talks, which crystallized in the final clash in Bali, is a distraction from the reality that all countries have agreed, by the end of 2009, to do something new: define a threshold for greenhouse gases beyond which the world will not go.

“We were all there for a collective good, and I was playing a role for the collective good,” he said. “We have an opportunity here, and that’s why I hope we don’t fumble it.”