

Climate Plan Looks Beyond Bush's Tenure



Supri/Reuters

Activists sprayed a banner in Nusa Dua, the town on Bali island where delegates from nearly 200 nations met for climate talks.

By THOMAS FULLER and ANDREW C. REVKIN
Published: December 16, 2007

NUSA DUA, Indonesia — The world's faltering effort to cut greenhouse gas emissions got a new lease on life on Saturday, as delegates from 187 countries agreed to negotiate a new accord over the next two years — pushing the crucial debates about United States participation into the administration of a new American president.

Many officials and environmental campaigners said American negotiators had remained obstructionist until the final hour of the two-week convention and had changed their stance only after public rebukes that included boos and hisses from other delegates.

The resulting “[Bali Action Plan](#)” contains no binding commitments, which European countries had sought and the United States fended off. The plan concludes that “deep cuts in global emissions will be required” and provides a timetable for two years of talks to shape the first formal addendum to the 1992 Framework Convention on Climate Change treaty since the Kyoto Protocol 10 years ago.

“The next presidential election takes place at the halfway point in these treaty talks,” David D. Doniger, who directs climate policy for the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) and served in the Clinton administration, said on his Web log on Saturday. “So the U.S. will field a new team in the second half. And there are good odds that the next president will get serious on [global warming](#).”

But the White House, while calling the negotiating plan “quite positive” in a printed statement, said the problem lay elsewhere. It described “serious concerns” about the limited steps taken by emerging economic powers.



Murdani Usman/Reuters

Yvo de Boer, left, and Rachmat Witoelar, leaders of the climate change conference in Bali, Indonesia, shook hands Saturday.

Without citing China and India by name, it clearly singled them out, saying: “The negotiations must proceed on the view that the problem of climate change cannot be adequately addressed through commitments for emissions cuts by developed countries alone. Major developing economies must likewise act.”

In the talks, China and other emerging powers did inch forward, agreeing for the first time to seek ways to make “measurable, reportable and verifiable” emissions cuts. But those countries showed no signs of agreeing to any mandatory restrictions any time soon, saying their priority remained growing out of poverty.

The finish to the negotiations came after a last-minute standoff in the public plenary at the end of a day of high emotions, with the co-organizer of the conference, Yvo de Boer, fleeing the podium at one point as he held back tears.

The standoff started when developing countries demanded that the United States agree that the eventual pact measure not only poorer countries’ steps, but also the effectiveness of financial and technological assistance from wealthier ones.

The United States capitulated in that open session, which many observers and delegates said included more public acrimony than any of the treaty conferences since the 1992 framework.

The concession, though, came after a more profound shift by the Bush administration, which agreed during the two-week conference to pursue a new pact fulfilling the unmet goals of the original treaty; the pact would take effect in 2012 when the Kyoto Protocol expires.

While many observers described the United States change as a U-turn, it was the culmination of months of movement by the Bush administration, which had for years insisted that the 1992 treaty was enough to avoid dangerous human interference with the climate.

In 2005 talks in Montreal, for example, the American negotiating team walked out of one session, rejecting any talk of formal negotiations to improve on that pact.

Since then, the Bush administration has been confronted by new scientific data on climate change and by growing political pressure both internationally and domestically.

Still, while accepting on Saturday the need for a new agreement, the United States retained the flexibility that it had sought at the outset, fending off European attempts to set binding commitments on emission reductions. American negotiators said that was vital to gain global consensus.

The targets sought by Europe and others remain in the action plan — including the need for rich countries to cut emissions by 2020 up to 40 percent below 1990 levels, and a 50 percent cut in emissions globally by 2050. But they are now a footnote to the nonbinding preamble, not a main feature of the plan.

Andrew Light, an expert on environmental ethics at the [University of Washington](#) who was in Bali, criticized the Bush administration for insisting on those targets being sidelined, saying the United States had, in essence, rejected the foreboding climate projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which it had repeatedly praised in recent weeks.

“We could have moved on from here with a confident range of future cuts,” Mr. Light said. “Instead we have to move on with the same continued uncertainty. At the beginning of the week I was really heartened by the public praise the U.S. delegation was giving to the I.P.C.C. and now I can’t help but think, was it all lip service?”

Some environmental groups criticized Europe for not sticking to its guns. But it appeared that, in the end, the Europeans followed a path recommended in a speech last Monday by former Vice President [Al Gore](#), fresh from receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo.

He advised Bali negotiators to look beyond the Bush administration, whose tenure ends in one year.

Beyond the histrionics and the politics, there were deeper reasons for the continuing clashes: in particular, the huge wave of industrialization and economic growth sweeping Asia.

The United States and Europe were largely responsible for taking the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas emitted by the burning of fossil fuels, to its current concentration of 380 parts per million from 280, a level which, until the industrial revolution, was not exceeded in at least 650,000 years.

But the growth in emissions for decades to come will largely be driven by developing countries, where some two billion people still cook on firewood or dung and crave the comforts and prosperity that come with abundant energy.

According to a recent analysis led by economists at the Electric Power Research Institute, if rich and poor countries do not together divert from “business as usual,” the concentration by 2040 could exceed 450 parts per million, a threshold that many scientists say could set in motion harmful changes for centuries to come.

Europe prevailed over the United States in one area, insisting that the next two years of talks proceed on two tracks: one for those countries, including the United States, not committing to mandatory limits, and a second building on the Kyoto Protocol, the 1997 update to the original treaty that requires emissions reductions in 36 major industrialized nations, but has been rejected by the United States.

The United States team in Bali had fought against that, demanding that a new agreement encompass the world’s major polluters and have sufficient flexibility, and no hard targets, to do that.

But in the end the United States had to agree to two tracks to avoid a total breakdown of the talks.

That is important, environmental campaigners said, because it guarantees work toward new mandatory gas restrictions in 2012, when the limits under the current Kyoto accord expire.

It also sustains a mechanism that, in theory, the United States could join under a new administration — if Congress becomes less insistent that the biggest developing countries move in lockstep.

That demand is reflected in some language in the current climate bill moving forward in the Senate, which demands “comparable” action from such countries.

There were many moments of drama and theater in the negotiations, at a resort complex on the southern tip of Bali, involving 11,000 officials, environmentalists, industry lobbyists and journalists. But nothing else matched the point on Saturday, in the final tumultuous plenary, when the American team was booed for trying to block a proposal by India.

Kevin Conrad, the negotiator from Papua New Guinea, rebuked the American delegation. “If for some reason you are not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us,” he said. “Please, get out of the way.”

He was alluding to remarks made by an American official, James Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, last week to a Reuters reporter, who quoted him as saying, “The U.S. will lead, and we will continue to lead, but leadership also requires others to fall in line and follow.”

That statement had become a sore point to many delegations.

A few more statements were made, but none of America’s traditional allies came to its defense.

Finally, Paula Dobriansky, the lead American negotiator, spoke.

“We came here to Bali because we want to go forward as part of a new framework,” said Ms. Dobriansky, the under secretary of state for democracy and global affairs. “We believe we have a shared vision and we want to move that forward. We want a success here in Bali. We will go forward and join consensus.”

The delegates erupted in lengthy applause, realizing that a deal was finally at hand.

Thomas Fuller reported from Nusa Dua, and Andrew C. Revkin from New York. Peter Gelling contributed reporting from Nusa Dua.