

The UN Climate Change Conference

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December 20, 2007

The purpose of the annual UN Climate Change Conference, held over two weeks this year in Bali, was to determine the scope and timetable for negotiating a climate agreement for when the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012. In principle, it was a meeting about future meetings. The most controversial issue at hand was the U.S. refusal to agree to a global emissions-reduction target of 25 to 40 percent from 1990 levels by 2020. U.S. negotiators, supported by a few other countries, said the level of emissions reduction should be determined over the next two years and should not be a predetermined starting point for negotiations. In the end, compromise language on the “need for a long-term global goal on emissions reduction” made it into the final action plan without reference to specific targets.

Q1: What did the Europeans threaten to do?

A1: When the United States, Japan, and other governments refused to accept language in a draft document requiring industrialized nations to cut emissions by 25 to 40 percent, Europe threatened to boycott the next U.S.-sponsored Major Economies Meeting on Energy Security and Climate Change, which brings together the 15 or so major emitters of greenhouse gases and will take place in January 2008. European nations and others argued that firm targets were essential in order to curb global warming, but the opposing countries said such targets would limit the scope of future talks. In the end, after late night negotiations, the two sides reached a compromise. The specific targets were removed from the text, but a footnote, referencing the scientific study that supports those targets, was included. The two sides also committed to continue negotiations on this particular issue.

Q2: What did the summit accomplish?

A2: The meeting did succeed in setting a framework for the negotiations over the next two years. There was agreement to include a pilot program for protecting developing countries from deforestation, a topic that had been excluded from earlier agreements. The meeting also agreed to additional incentives for adaptation measures and commitments to technology development and deployment. Perhaps most notably, developing countries agreed to consider taking concrete measures to limit greenhouse gas emissions in exchange for a commitment by developed countries to provide clean energy technologies and financing.

Q3: What remains to be done?

A3: It is important to remember that negotiations on a post-2012 framework will take place over at least the next two years. Many seek an international agreement in place by the 2009 annual summit in Copenhagen to allow enough time for countries to ratify it before the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. During that time, many issues will need to be resolved and none of them will be easy. Some of the most contentious or complex ones include: the role of developing economies (what type of commitments they can and will make); whether developed economies will take on concrete long-term emissions-reduction commitments or some other goal more in line with their national circumstance; how to include forest management and other land-use issues in the next agreement; and how to approach global cooperation on technology, financing, and adaptation.

Q4: What happens next?

A4: The next meeting will take place no later than April 2008, and meetings will continue as “often as is feasible and necessary to complete the work.” Many of the issues that will be debated in the context of the ongoing UN negotiations will be taken up before and during the U.S.-led Major Economies Meeting in January. Although work will proceed next year, the reality is that many countries are waiting to see who wins the U.S. presidential election before reaching a conclusion on some of the most controversial issues.

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