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Poor Nations Say They Cannot Bear Equal Burden on Greenhouse Gases

By CALVIN SIMS

KYOTO, Japan, Dec. 11 — While the Clinton Administration has said it will not submit a landmark environmental agreement for Senate approval unless developing countries also do more, the world's poor argue that cost and fairness dictate that the sacrifices needed to preserve the globe's climate should not be heaped on them.

Even with the signing of the accord here this week by 160 countries, industrialized and developing nations continue feuding over which side bears the burden for reducing emissions of gases implicated in global warming.

The developing countries upset the conference by refusing to commit themselves to emission reduction targets that their wealthier counterparts have pledged to meet under the agreement.

Poorer countries were exempted from such goals and were called on only to take part in efforts to use cleaner energy sources that would be sponsored by richer nations.

"How can we devote our precious resources towards reducing emissions when we are struggling every day just to feed, clothe and house our citizens?" said F. V. Mayinga Mkandawire, Malawi's Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environmental Affairs.

The resistance by developing countries came after many years of fence-sitting in the face of Western pressure, and it marked a turn toward a more antagonistic stand against the global cleanup effort.

But poorer countries have long argued that the world's rich industrialized countries got that way by using the cheapest and dirtiest energy sources available to them for generations.

Most of the gases already contributing the globe's warming have come from industrialized nations. For example, the current per-capita emissions of the gases in developing countries are far below those in energy-intensive countries like the United States and Japan.

"The third world produces far less of these dangerous gases than industrialized nations, but we are being asked to do more than our fair share to clean them up," Mr. Mkandawire said.

Even rich countries fear the economic effects of complying with the costly reductions outlined in the proposed treaty, and they have far greater resources and know-how available to them.

For poorer nations, meeting the treaty's goals would not merely force them to make factories run cleaner or to forego buying gas-guzzling minivans and Suburbans as in the West. It would instead call for sacrifices far more basic to their social and economic development.

If the West wants the cooperation of poorer nations, these countries say, it should share its wealth and technology.

The developing nations also maintained that the West has ignored the progress they have already made in reducing emissions.

Proposals at this week's conference from industrialized countries for voluntary emission cuts by developing nations proved that point, they said. The treaty talks nearly fell apart when delegates from 130 developing countries flexed their combined muscle in opposition to just such a plan.

"It's a myth that the developing countries don't care about the environment," said Jonathan Lash, president of the World Resources Institute, a Washington-based research organization. "Many of these countries have already made significant reductions in their emissions, but larger, more industrialized nations rarely acknowledge this fact."

What is a fair share of the global cleanup burden?

For example, Mr. Lash said that in recent years, China had increased its fuel prices by 121 percent, resulting in a 20 percent reduction in emissions of carbon dioxide. He noted similar emission reductions by India, Mexico and Brazil, which have also raised fuel prices. In some cases these steps were taken to increase government revenues, but the environmental effect was the same.

In addition, environmentalists say India has become the world's largest wind-energy producer and Bangladesh has provided energy to many of its rural villages with solar power.

But it is less the current situation than the projections for the future that make the participation of developing nations vital to any effective action to stem climate change, many experts say.

Although developing nations now account for 30 to 40 percent of the world's emissions of the so-called greenhouse gases, they account for 80 percent of the world's population, and their emissions will soon exceed those of industrialized countries as their economies expand.

If the world's most populous, poorer countries indeed develop as much of the West did -- burning coal and other fossil fuels -- the consequences will be disastrous, some experts say.

"Within the next 30 years, increases in emissions by developing countries will reach the point where it's fair to say that the problem of global warming cannot be solved unless these nations agree to emissions targets," Mr. Lash said. "We in the industrialized world created the problem, but we can't solve it without cooperation from the developing countries."

But that cooperation may prove difficult to gain, particularly given the economic restraints of poor countries, and it may depend on some sign that richer nations are meeting their own commitments to reduce emissions.

Under the treaty, which must be approved by the legislatures of the countries that have signed it, industrialized nations agreed to cut emissions by an average of 5.2 percent between 2008 and 2012.

Yet another bone of contention was a plan to set up an emission trading system that would allow countries that exceed their pollution limits to purchase "credits" from countries that pollute less. The United States, in particular, said Congressional approval of the accord could depend on such a provision. Negotiations over such a plan, which divided this week's conference, have been put off until the end of next year.

The developing nations said that they feared that such a trading system would allow rich countries to buy their way into compliance rather than undertake unpopular emissions cuts.

But environmental experts said that because the number of emission credits would be fixed, countries that bought their way into compliance would still be contributing to an overall reduction in global emissions.

"If an industrialized country emits more than its quota, then it will have to pay to purchase credits from countries," said Graciela Chichilnisky, an economics professor at Columbia University, who devised the trading scheme. "The country that receives payment is the country that is reducing emissions because it doesn't have to use its credits. Either you emit or sell your rights emit or sell your rights to emit and get money for them."