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### South Africa gears up for climate change talks

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JOHANNESBURG, Oct. 25 (Xinhua) -- South African environmental activists took to the streets of the country's major cities over the weekend, urging the government to be proactive at December's United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark.

In Johannesburg, the World Environment Day on Saturday saw a giant statue of former President Nelson Mandela being draped with a banner, urging current President Jacob Zuma to attend the Copenhagen summit in person.

In Cape Town, the famous Table Mountain Cableway was also surrounded by large banners.

Although there has been no official word on whether Zuma will go to Copenhagen, South Africa has mapped out a comprehensive response to climate change.

The country, which is Africa's greatest emitter of greenhouse gases, is widely expected to commit to a carbon emission reduction roadmap at Copenhagen meeting. It will not be a simple rubber stamp when South Africa joins approximately 190 other parties updating their commitments to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

While there is almost a universal agreement on the need to cut carbon emissions, South Africa sides with other developing nations in asking that developing nations be compensated if they set limits.

The crux of the argument is that developed nations have already caused most of the environmental damage to get where they are now, and they are still the major polluters. They can not reasonably expect nations which are still trying to develop their infrastructure and other facets, to cut back on carbon emissions, at least not without compensation.

Graciela Chichilnisky, an economics professor at Columbia University who helped design the Kyoto Protocol's international carbon market, said earlier this month that 60 percent of all carbon emissions come from rich industrial nations that house only 20 percent of the world's population but use most of its resources.

In Africa, South Africa is the most industrialized country and its economy is also the largest economy on the continent. Most of South Africa's electricity is generated from coal-fired power stations. Thus the government has identified electricity as providing the greatest potential for mitigation, which here means reducing carbon emissions.

In notes prepared for a video-link discussion before December's summit, the South African government said the country, like other emerging and developing countries, has not been spared from the potentially severe impacts of climate change.

For example, in the last two decades or so, South Africa has experienced a number of climatic hazards. The most serious ones have been dry spells, seasonal droughts, intense rainfall, riverine floods and flash floods.

In fact, droughts and floods have increased in frequency, intensity and magnitude over the past two or three decades in the southern African region.

They have adversely impacted on food and water security, water quality, energy and sustainable livelihoods of the most rural communities. Currently, the majority of rural communities are experiencing chronic food deficits in many parts of the region on a year-round basis because of the effects of floods and droughts.

This increasing prevalence of recurrent floods and droughts has had far-reaching consequences for poor people in terms of food, water, health and energy in South Africa both in rural and urban areas.

The plight of the poor who dwell in informal settlements on the Cape Flats, near Cape Town,

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is, according to the government, "indeed a stark reminder of the fact that the world's poorest people are the most vulnerable to the increasingly frequent natural disasters such as flooding and droughts attributed to climate change."

Thus, climate change poses a serious threat to sustainable development in South Africa, largely due to the lack of capacity to manage the impacts of global climate change on the most vulnerable that sadly appear to constitute the vast majority of the South African population.

South Africa has acknowledged its role in the emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs) through its excessive dependence on coal. It has noted the immediate need for the country to move from being an energy-intensive economy to a low-carbon growth economy.

Current and proposed interventions on the ground for mitigating climate change have mainly focused on the energy sector due to the increasing realization that energy production is the primary and major route for GHG emissions in South Africa.

This has culminated in the formulation and adoption of various interventions, including the White Paper on the Renewable Energy Policy for South Africa, by the Department of Minerals and Energy, which aims to realize energy security through progressive switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy resources such as biomass, hydro, solar and wind.

The National Climate Change Response Strategy for South Africa does not only perceive energy-induced climate change as a threat to sustainable development, but also as an opportunity for realizing sustainable development, especially when activities for climate change mitigation are linked to poverty eradication and human capital development.

The collaborative approaches proposed for mitigating and/or managing the impacts of climate change in the National Climate Change Response Strategy for South Africa, reflecting such a perception in the government.

The investment opportunities created by the Clean Development Mechanism projects and the associated skills development initiatives and recruitment offers provided by these projects demonstrated the strategic opportunities that South Africa has for harnessing sustainable development through appropriate climate change interventions.

Having signed the convention, South Africa was obliged to fulfill certain commitments, including the launching of a Country Study Programme, which it did in 1997.

South Africa prepared an Initial National Communication on Climate Change in 2000, as required by Article 12 of the UNFCCC. Right now it is preparing its Second National Communication which is expected to be submitted by 2011.

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