

UN Summit on Climate Change in New York

2009-09-24 19:09:14 by intuited



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If any Canadian ever had any doubt about Harper's apathy about the environment, the Prime Minister's recent decision for not showing up at the UN Summit on Climate Change, should help them to make up their minds. It was [reported](#) that Canada was hardly a factor in the climate summit, which came a day ahead of the annual UN General Assembly that traditionally turns midtown Manhattan black and blue with armoured limousines and police escorts. It was further reported that:

- In an apparent strategy of engagement if necessary, but not necessarily engagement, Prime Minister Stephen Harper skipped the morning session featuring the major addresses of Hu, Obama, Nicolas Sarkozy of France and others and instead had lunch with New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The meeting with Bloomberg, the Prime Minister's Office said, was to "raise the Buy America clause and the importance to promote open and free trade".

Speaking to reporters outside New York city hall, Harper dismissed suggestions Canada is on the debate's sidelines, saying his government is working with the Obama administration on a "truly continental approach" to climate change. He stated: "Our position is very clear - we want to see an effective international accord, one that includes all the major emitters of greenhouse gases."]

Harper later joined in the climate discussions, including a UN dinner at the behest of Secretary General Ban Ki-moon involving a quarter of the nearly 100 world leaders gathered in New York. And he will get another opportunity to assert a Canadian position during the two-day G20 summit in Pittsburgh.

Canadian climate policy critics said the new commitments yesterday show developing nations are beginning to rise to Ottawa's challenge and called on the government to act in kind. "The ground is shifting under the feet of the Harper government, which has consistently refused to take action on climate change," said Greenpeace Canada's Dave Martin.

Enough about the domestic politics.

The current Kyoto Protocol to prevent climate change and global warming will run out in 2012. Recognizing the urgency and the magnitude of efforts that will be required to keep the process on the line, the members

of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meet at the conference in Copenhagen 2009 (December 7-18) and this is the last time these countries are meeting at this government level before the climate agreement needs to be renewed. Government representatives from 170 countries are expected to be in Copenhagen in the days of the conference accompanied by NGO's, journalists and others. In total 8000 people are expected in Copenhagen during the climate meeting.

The climate change issue was described, in L'Aquila on 9 July at the Major Economies Forum, as "one of the major challenges of our time." At that meeting, the MEF leaders agreed on CO2 emission reduction targets, setting out to halve them by 2050. They also pledged to restrict the rise in temperature to 2 degrees centigrade, with a particular eye to the poor and developing countries and their involvement in the battle against climate change. They also pledged to make further headway along this road at the Copenhagen Conference itself.

The wish for clarity is expressed by Yvo de Boer, executive secretary of the UNFCCC, in an interview with [Environment & Energy Publishing \(E&E\)](#). According to Yvo de Boer, the four essentials calling for an international agreement in Copenhagen are:

1. How much are the industrialized countries willing to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases?
2. How much are major developing countries such as China and India willing to do to limit the growth of their emissions?
3. How is the help needed by developing countries to engage in reducing their emissions and adapting to the impacts of climate change going to be financed?
4. How is that money going to be managed?

The Summit on Climate Change in New York was convened on September 22, 2009. This summit was one of the major milestones and it was attended by the heads of state and government of over 90 United Nations countries and delegations from all 192 UN members. One of the central topics of the summit was "Paving the way for December's conference".

Hundreds of presidents, prime ministers and officials from across the globe took airplanes to the United Nations meeting, some accompanied by dozens of people. Limousines and motorcades ferried the dignitaries from airports to meetings to hotels and back, often getting stuck in Midtown Manhattan gridlock. But since the goal of this meeting was to reduce the global emissions that have been linked to [global warming](#), the United Nations decided to try to do something about all the carbon dioxide produced by the delegates: it bought carbon offsets.

Under a new and expanding program for offsetting emissions, United Nations administrators calculated that the meeting would generate the equivalent of 461 tons of carbon dioxide, with air travel being the single largest component. They offset those emissions by directing money to a power project in rural Andhra Pradesh, India, through which agricultural leftovers like rice husks and sunflower stalks are turned into electricity for the local grid.

There is no doubt that the United States is considered to be critical for success in Copenhagen. Unfortunately, the United States never joined the 1997 Kyoto accord, the first major attempt to limit emissions in a global treaty, partly because the accord did not set mandatory targets for powerhouse developing states like China. The United States and China account for more than 40 percent of the total carbon emissions, roughly divided between both. Here are the highlights of their Summit on Climate Change speeches:

- Mr. Obama acknowledged at the summit that the United States once played down the issue, but now recognized its gravity. The world "cannot allow the old divisions that have characterized the climate debate for so many years to block our progress," he said, adding that forging consensus would come slowly. "And so all of us will face doubts and difficulties in our own capitals as we try to reach a lasting solution to the climate challenge." However, he didn't make any specific commitments;
- Even some enthusiastic Obama supporters expressed disappointment that he had not used such an important global pulpit to make a stronger case for both international action and a forceful declaration of what the United States would do.
- China's president, [Hu Jintao](#), spoke of reducing the "carbon intensity" of his fast-growing economy, or cutting emissions as a percentage of future economic output, by a "notable" margin that he did not specify;
- Analysts gave China credit for taking carbon emissions more seriously. Its leaders now accept the

need to reduce pollution, partly because their country is vulnerable environmentally and partly because they hope to become leaders in green technology. But Mr. Hu neither defined “notable” nor accepted any binding cuts on emissions. He also tied the emissions reduction effort to the growth in China’s gross domestic product, so the amount of emissions per dollar of output - or “carbon intensity” - might shrink, but the overall number could still rise as the economy expanded.

There was a general consensus at the summit as well as around the globe that presidents and prime ministers of countries large and small spoke at the summit with soaring promises about the importance of confronting the problem for future generations. But when it came down to the nuts-and-bolts promises of what they were prepared to do in the next decade, experts and analysts were disappointed that there were no bold new proposals from any of those countries which could be taken to the Copenhagen Conference.
