

Issues & Ideas

Lukewarm Progress on Climate

By Bruce Stokes

■ Some 80 nations have announced emission targets or climate action plans since Copenhagen.

■ Voluntary programs, though, have a history of falling short.

■ Climate negotiators will meet again in Cancun, Mexico, late this fall, but don't expect much.

Despite the warmest six months on record, prospects are bleak for achieving significant international progress to slow global climate change any time soon. The politics and diplomacy seem to be moving at glacial speeds, while the planet's warming is accelerating like an avalanche.

The Senate may recess for August without voting on climate legislation. And when international negotiators meet in Cancun, Mexico, in late November, they will have virtually no prospect of signing a definitive climate agreement.

"The best you can hope for in Cancun," said Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, "is an elaboration of some of the things you have in the Copenhagen accord"—the informal deal that negotiators managed to salvage from the otherwise disappointing climate summit.

The inaction belies the urgency with which scientists talk about climate change. In less than a decade, concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere could reach 400 parts per million, a level that could lead to a long-term rise in average global temperatures in excess of 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit. Droughts and rising sea levels could result. To avoid such catastrophes, climatologists say that governments must collectively cut the current annual level of CO₂ emissions in half by 2050.

The Copenhagen summit failed to produce a legally binding climate agreement; participants instead settled for a number of

nonbinding promises. Developed nations vowed to set emissions targets for 2020. Developing countries promised nationally appropriate action on carbon emissions and said they would report on their progress every two years. Rich governments, meanwhile, pledged to raise \$30 billion in new funds by 2012 and to mobilize \$100 billion in public and private money by 2020 to help poor nations curb emissions.

Environmentalists contend that the promised emissions cuts are too modest and the financing pledges are too small. And critics in poorer nations say that it is unfair to demand promises from them if the rich countries don't meet their own reduction commitments.

Bottom line, "the Copenhagen accord is a series of voluntary pledges," Claussen said. "We do not have a great record of fulfilling voluntary pledges."

Todd Stern, the chief U.S. climate negotiator, objects that such criticism shortchanges some real accomplishments at Copenhagen. He points to approximately 80 nations that have subsequently announced emission targets or climate action plans. Rich nations are indeed writing checks to help poor countries curb their emissions, he says. In May, Norway agreed to contribute up to \$1 billion to reduce deforestation in Indonesia.

But even though governments have made promises, the intensity of public concern about global warming has slipped noticeably in the past year. According to the 2010 Pew Global Attitudes survey, the number of people who say that climate change is a *very* serious problem has fallen from 44 percent to 37 percent in the United States. Similarly, the intensity of concern has dropped 7 percentage points in Japan, 9 points in Germany, 10 points in Britain, and 22 points in France. The decline raises questions about the collective political will to actu-

■ Todd Stern



RICHARD A. BLOOM

■ "In some respects, some countries are mentally throwing in the towel. That is not a good idea."

ally follow through on governmental commitments.

Nowhere is the absence of will more evident than in Congress. A climate bill passed the House in 2009, but by just seven votes and with only eight GOP members supporting it. Various Senate iterations of climate legislation, none of them as tough on emissions as the House version, have failed to gain traction, and they so far lack the 60 votes needed for passage.

“There is no chance that the Senate bill will be comprehensive,” Claussen said. “There is a very small chance there will be a cap on emissions by utilities.”

With both the House and the Senate likely to be more conservative next year because of predicted GOP victories in the fall, the U.S. may have no legally binding limits on greenhouse-gas emissions in the foreseeable future. “I think it’s absolutely critical for the United States to [pass legislation],” Stern said at a climate forum at the Brookings Institution in May. “It’s enormously important for our leverage and credibility in the international discussions, and it would greatly affect the atmosphere of the negotiations.”

Another problem is the quid pro quo nature of the \$100 billion in climate-change money that the wealthy countries have pledged to poor countries to help them reduce carbon emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change. The developing countries will be slow to act on their pledges to reduce emissions and accept international scrutiny of their actions until they know that the money has been set aside. Congress’s failure to pass legislation would raise doubts about whether the United States will ever have the steady stream of revenue from carbon taxes needed to provide its share of the funds.

“The focus internationally has been on U.S. legislation,” Claussen said. “If we don’t manage to do it, the ability of the U.S. to lead will be almost nonexistent.”

Despite all that, Stern is upbeat. “It is not the case that everything hinges on U.S. legislation,” he countered. “We will find a way to have a positive result, even if the legislation is not done.” He predicts that Cancun negotiators will flesh out the Copenhagen guidelines for monitoring, reporting, and verifying emissions-

■ Feeling the Heat



GETTY IMAGES/CHRIS HONDROS

■ The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 2010 has already seen global surface temperatures that are higher than any year on record.

reduction commitments and will try to further nail down the financial support promised to developing countries.

But even this may prove difficult, critics say. “I don’t think you can agree on any of this without an agreement on most, if not all, of it,” Claussen contended, “because it’s a little bit of a quid pro quo: no financing, no adaptation, no transparency. I have a hard time seeing how you could reach conclusions on all of them in Cancun.”

The limited prospects for Cancun underscore the shortcomings of the Copenhagen accord. That deal left countries free to do their own thing in the hope that the sum of collective national commitments would begin to turn the tide on global warming. But several recent scientific studies conclude that national emissions-reduction pledges, even if fully implemented, will not hold global temperature increases below 3.5 degrees.

In the end, slowing climate change will require enforceable international commitments. Until that is possible, the Obama administration is expected to rely on the Clean Air Act, in lieu of climate-change legislation, to clamp down on the release of greenhouse gases, and to ratchet up vehicle mileage standards. But climate activists have no illusions

that those steps will be sufficient to reach the administration’s goal of cutting U.S. emissions by 17 percent by 2020.

To fill the international void, William Antholis and Strobe Talbott of the Brookings Institution, in their new book *Fast Forward: Ethics and Politics in the Age of Global Warming*, propose that China, the European Union, India, and the United States, which together account for 60 percent of greenhouse gases worldwide, regulate their emissions in an increasingly coordinated fashion.

The authors call on the leaders of these nations to negotiate a General Agreement to Reduce Emissions, much like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which would set rules, arbitrate disputes, and establish incentives for emissions reductions through reciprocal laws

that do not subordinate national policies to international regulation. The GATT—a similar loose set of mutually agreeable rules—served the world trading system well for more than four decades before the advent of the World Trade Organization. Antholis and Talbott suggest that a general set of climate rules may be the necessary precursor to a world climate regime. Or in other words, walk before we can run.

“As we sit here in July,” Stern concluded in an interview with *National Journal*, “there is not a great deal of inflated expectations for Cancun. In some respects, some countries are mentally throwing in the towel. That is not a good idea. It is still important for people to put one foot in front of the other.”

So, he said, “we in the United States are approaching Cancun in a spirit of hope. This is the right forum for climate change. And we should all do everything in our power to make it work. The reality, of course, is that we cannot accept year after year of stalemate, because the urgency of the problem we are charged with addressing does not permit that luxury. Should we face an enduring deadlock, countries will be forced to search for other ways to contain the climate threat. In our view, that would be a highly undesirable development.”

But failure in Congress this summer and in Cancun in December may make the undesirable inevitable. ■

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