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US agrees to back global warming pact

Marian Wilkinson, Bali
December 16, 2007

UNITED Nations-led climate talks in Bali agreed last night to launch talks on a new global warming deal to succeed the Kyoto Protocol, after the US dropped last-minute opposition.

The talks in Bali came to a tense climax as angry disagreements broke out between nations. The US representative was booed from the floor for refusing to accept the final draft worked out with Europe, China and India.

But an hour later the US delegation backed down and promised to come to a consensus, opening the way for the Bali road map to be signed.

The stand-off had forced the UN Secretary-General and the Indonesian President to plead personally with ministers not to let the two-week-long talks collapse.

"No delegation can get everything it wants," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had told them earlier, saying he was disappointed with their progress in clinching the final deal. "Seize this moment for the good of all humanity."

His message was backed by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whose country hosted the conference.

"We must produce a Bali road map to guide us," Mr Yudhoyono said. "We cannot fail. We must not fail."

Minutes later, US chief negotiator Paula Dobriansky rejected the compromise. "We cannot accept this," she said. "We are not prepared to accept the formulation at this time."

Ms Dobriansky was immediately attacked by the South African delegation, which said her words were "most unwelcome and without any basis".

Australia's Climate Change Minister, Penny Wong, who played a key role in the last long hours of the negotiations, earlier told reporters that the final breakthrough on the critical talks was proving extremely difficult.

"Obviously there are some strongly held views. Building a consensus is not an easy task, but we will continue to do everything we can."

The Bali declaration was supposed to be signed on Friday and is to serve as the "road map" to launch the negotiations for a new global climate agreement to be signed in 2009.

In the last hours, agreement was sought on a watered-down version. Even so the final deal seemed elusive when China and other developing countries claimed the US was evading its responsibilities while trying to pressure poorer countries to make commitments about cuts to their emissions.

The Europeans swung their support behind China and Pakistan, backing their efforts to put pressure on rich countries to tie funding for clean technology and aid to any cuts they would be willing to make in greenhouse gas emissions.

They also wanted a watered-down deal on any commitments to cut their gases, insisting the Bali deal did not put any significant pressure on the US to examine deep cuts to its emissions.

Anger from China and the developing nations led by India, Pakistan and South Africa boiled over after the US succeeded in cutting critical scientific advice from the draft deal. That advice said the rich countries would have to cut their greenhouse emissions by between 25% and 40% by 2020.

Instead, the US would only agree to a footnote that made a reference to the advice from the UN's peak scientific body and a note that "deep cuts in global emissions" would be needed to halt climate change.

The European Union had said the scientific advice was "indispensable" but compromised to keep the US from walking away.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd told reporters in Darwin yesterday morning that the negotiations were "very tough".

He said Senator Wong had been playing a key role as a co-chair of the high-level negotiating session. She had her "sleeves rolled up", and would be "sleep deprived" trying to bring about a decent outcome.

"This is a very difficult negotiation," Mr Rudd said. "All people of the world are placing their hopes and their faith in the governments of the world to produce a decent outcome for the planet."

What it means

* The Bali talks agreed to launch negotiations on a new global warming pact to succeed the Kyoto Protocol. Bali was essentially "talks about talks".

* The deal, after two weeks of negotiations, is one step towards slowing global warming.

* The Bali meeting approved a "road map" for talks to adopt a new treaty at a meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2009.

* Kyoto binds all industrialised countries except the US to cut greenhouse gas emissions between 2008 and 2012. Developing nations are exempt.

* The new negotiations will seek to bind all countries to emission curbs from 2013.

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