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UN Climate Conference: The countdown to Copenhagen

In 331 days' time, 15,000 officials from 200 countries will gather in the Danish capital with 1 goal: to find a solution to global warming. Michael McCarthy, Environment Editor, presents the first in a series of dispatches on the crucial summit

Three hundred and thirty-one days, plus a final frantic fortnight: not very long, really, to put together the most complex and vital agreement the world has ever seen. But that's all the time there is: in 331 days from now, on 7 December, the UN Climate Conference will open in Copenhagen and the world community will try to agree a solution to the gravest threat it has ever faced: global warming.

Between 10,000 and 15,000 officials, advisers, diplomats, campaigners and media personnel from nearly 200 countries, almost certainly joined by limousine-loads of heads of state and government from America's President Barack Obama down are expected to meet in the Danish capital in one of the most significant gatherings in history.

If that sounds like exaggeration, we need only glance at some historical comparisons. The Copenhagen meeting will have a far broader reach and potential impact on the world than the Congress of Vienna, say, the 1814-1815 assembly which attempted to reorder Europe after the Napoleonic wars, or the Paris peace conference of 1919, which tried to construct a new global order after the First World War, or the 1945 meetings at Yalta and Potsdam which tried to do the same after the Second World War. For they were all dealing with national boundaries, politics and political structures, phenomena which of course are vital in human terms, but ephemeral and changeable. Copenhagen will be dealing with something fundamental to life on earth: the stability of the biosphere.

Known officially in UN-speak as COP 15 – the 15th meeting of the parties of the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change – the meeting in Denmark will try to work out a way for the world to act together to preserve the thin envelope of atmosphere, soil and sea which surrounds our planet and enables us to live, in the face of rising temperatures which threaten to destroy its habitability.

All the world's major governments, including the once-sceptical administration of the US President George Bush, now formally accept that temperature rises have already begun, are likely if unchecked to prove disastrous for human civilisation, and are being caused by emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide from our power plants, factories and motor vehicles.

But if all the major governments now accept it, getting them to agree on how to tackle it still seems a very long way off indeed. The essential problem, to use the jargon, is burden-sharing. We know the world has to cut its CO2 emissions drastically, and soon. But which countries are to cut them, by how much?

The Chinese, for example, with their scarcely believable economy growing at 10 per cent a year, have now overtaken the Americans as the biggest carbon emitters; but historically, America has emitted far more; and on a per capita basis, US emissions still dwarf those of China. So the Chinese have felt (so far) that they have a moral right for their economy to grow unchecked, and their carbon emissions to grow with it; but many Americans have felt (so far) that they see no reason to act unilaterally to cut their own CO2 if the Chinese are not willing to do the same.

Differences like those stubbornly percolate the whole negotiating process and make achieving a universal agreement mind-bogglingly hard. "This is the most complicated deal the world has ever tried to put together," says Tom Burke, visiting professor at Imperial College and an adviser on climate change to the Foreign Office. "In effect, you're asking

nearly 200 countries to align their energy policies – to create a common world energy policy. If you look at how hard it has been for the member states of the European Union to align their energy policies, you get an idea of the difficulty of attempting it with the whole world."

Yet it has to be done, and the penalty for failure could not be higher. It is just 20 years since the world woke up to the danger of rising carbon emissions destabilising the atmosphere. Two decades ago it seemed a fairly distant threat, prefigured principally in supercomputer climate prediction programmes; something that was likely to happen a comfortably long distance away, such as at the end of the 21st century.

Three things have altered since then. First, the changing climate is now visible, not just in computer predictions, but all around us: spring in southern Britain, for example, is arriving about three weeks earlier than it did 40 years ago. At this time last year a red admiral butterfly, an archetypal creature of the summer, was photographed perching on a snowdrop, a flower of the winter – a previously unheard-of occurrence.

Second, it has become clear in the past five years that the earth is responding to the increasing CO₂ loading of the atmosphere much more rapidly than scientists initially thought. There are numerous examples but to instance just one, the summer sea ice of the Arctic Ocean is melting far more quickly than anyone imagined.

Third, it has become apparent, even more recently, that global emissions of CO₂ are shooting up at a rate that far exceeds anything the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) thought possible when it sketched out future emissions scenarios in a special report in 2000. Even though we have had 20 years to think about emissions cuts, and 11 years of the Kyoto protocol, the treaty which actually prescribed the first cuts for the industrialised countries, emissions are soaring as never before.

Some leading climate scientists are now openly voicing concerns that this makes it increasingly unlikely we can meet the aim of keeping global temperature rise to about 2C above the pre-industrial level, which is generally regarded as the most that may be endured by human society without mortal danger. (We are now at about 0.75 degrees C above pre-industrial, and another 0.6 of a degree is thought to be inevitable because of the CO₂ which has already been emitted).

Certainly, if we are to have any chance at all at holding the increase to two degrees, there is wide agreement that global emissions have to peak very soon – probably by 2015 or 2016 – and then rapidly decrease, to 80 per cent below present levels by 2050. The later the peak, the greater (and therefore more difficult) the subsequent decrease would have to be.

That's the pathway the world has to follow. Copenhagen offers the chance to set out along it. But even if the deal in December is not as ambitious as scientists and environmentalists insist is necessary – and at the moment, that seems pretty likely – it is vital that there is actually an accord. Disagreement would be a catastrophe.

Three conditions, according to Britain's Energy and Climate Change Secretary, Ed Miliband, have to be fulfilled for Copenhagen to be regarded as a success. First, the wealthy industrialised countries have to agree tough new targets for cutting their CO₂. Second, the developing countries led by China, even if they do not take on the same sort of numerical targets, have to move away from "business as usual". And third, the rich nations have to agree a way of financing the developing countries, especially the poorer ones, in the measures they take to adapt to the climate change that is coming anyway. Otherwise they won't sign up to anything.

Securing such a deal will be a matter of political will: a global political consensus will have to be hammered out. It is becoming clear that, over the next 11 months, the world could well do with a high-level political fixer, jetting unceasingly from capital to capital, to pull such a consensus together, in the manner in which the Argentine diplomat, Raul Estrada, managed to pull the original Kyoto agreement together in the Japanese city in December 1997. It could be Britain's Ed Miliband, according to Tom Burke. "There has to be someone who can put the time in, and go round various capitals and talk to the key people at a very high level, and not just environment ministers," he says. "Ed Miliband could play that role. He's known to be close to Gordon Brown, and Britain is reasonably respected for its record on climate change. It doesn't have to be him. But there probably needs to be someone."

However, Mr Miliband, and the British Government, may face a problem of reduced credibility in climate change terms as a result of two policy decisions likely to be taken in the next few weeks. One, which Mr Miliband will take personally, is whether or not to agree to a new coal-fired power station at Kingsnorth in Kent. If he gives it the go-ahead, without strict controls over its emissions, environmentalists will accuse him of sanctioning a new generation of power plants run on the most carbon-intensive fuel. The other is whether or not to allow Heathrow airport to build a third runway, and thus expand British aviation, whose CO₂ emissions are growing faster than those of any other sector.

If both these projects go ahead – as seems perfectly possible – there is no doubt that the UK's position as a potential Copenhagen broker will be weakened. "If countries like Britain, who, for better or worse, are the global leaders, go to Copenhagen with new coal-fired power stations and expanding airports at home, it's very difficult to see how we will be taken seriously by other countries which have even more serious energy security problems and concerns about economic

growth," said Robin Oakley, the head of climate change at Greenpeace UK. "That leadership can't just be shown by grandstanding at the meeting. It has to be shown by what we do in our domestic policy."

In the absence of Mr Miliband or any other leading politician emerging as the Copenhagen fixer, the key player in the process is likely to be Barack Obama. The President-elect has already opened a chasm, in terms of climate change policy, between himself and the outgoing George Bush, who, in 2001, withdrew the US from Kyoto and began years of climate policy obstructionism.

Mr Bush wanted no truck with emissions cuts of any sort; Mr Obama has pledged he will get US emissions down to 80 per cent of 1990 levels by 2050 (a target identical with Britain's) and "engage vigorously" with the international negotiating process over the next few months. Hints have been dropped that he may convene meetings of key world leaders to speed the negotiations along. It seems highly likely that he will go to Copenhagen himself – which means every other world leader will want to be present.

Whether or not they can do the deal the world needs is another matter. Yet there is no doubt the world needs it. It may seem reasonable to think, in the coldest winter for years, that global warming has gone away, yet nothing could be further from the truth.



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