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March 29, 2009

Leaders to meet in summer for special climate change talks

Obama's call hits home, writes Geoffrey Lean

Leaders attending the G20 meeting in London plan to gather again in the summer for a special summit on tackling climate change, The Independent on Sunday can reveal.

The new summit – which is being called on the initiative of President Barack Obama as part of a US drive to get a new international agreement on tackling global warming – is to take place alongside the annual G8 gathering of world leaders on the island of La Maddalena off Sardinia.

Scientists and environmentalists will hope that it will make up for a failure by the leaders at this week's meeting to do more than agree warm words about the need for a "green new deal" and the importance of building low-carbon economies. Every nation attending has flatly refused to discuss any commitment to devote an agreed percentage of its financial stimulus package to green measures, insisting instead on focusing on relatively short-term measures to tackle the immediate financial crisis.

News of the summit comes as governments gather in Bonn today to start eight months of negotiations on an agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol, which are to climax at a conference in Copenhagen in December. The conference is widely seen as the world's last chance of getting global warming under control before it precipitates disastrous climate change.

This month President Obama wrote to Gordon Brown and the leaders of France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Japan, Canada, China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, South Korea, Australia and Indonesia to propose the summit, and the plan has gelled over the past week. Ironically, it will take place under the auspices of a mechanism – the "major economies" meetings – started by the former US president, George W Bush, to detract from the international attempt to get a new treaty, rather than galvanise it.

The initiative is one of the clearest signs to date of the unexpectedly high priority the new President is giving to combating climate change.

Gordon Brown has repeatedly pledged that the G20 London summit would launch a "global green new deal". Many, will be disappointed, however, at the failure of the G20 talks to commit nations to take the opportunity offered by the huge spending on stimulus packages to allocate a high proportion of the money to recession-beating environmental measures.

Countries have earmarked widely varying percentages (see graphic). South Korea leads with 81 per cent, while Britain is one of the worst performers at 7 per cent. China has earmarked more than 110 times as much money as the UK for the purpose.

Lord Stern, the author of a seminal government report on climate change, says that 20 per cent of the stimulus should go on green measures, which have been shown to employ more people and spark more innovation than conventional economic ones. When the UK government put the proposal on the table for the G20 meeting, not a single country supported it.

But late last week, secret pre-summit negotiations were making progress on agreeing measures to help developing countries, including maintaining aid and increasing finance for the International Monetary Fund.



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