

Bumpy ride ahead for Bali road map

By Gary LaMoshi

BALI – In the end, every side blinked.

The European Union and developing countries decided that they had more to gain from a Bali road map climate change agreement including the United States, than one without the world's top greenhouse gas emitter. The US decided that it wanted to remain in the conversation rather than be isolated and vilified for preventing an agreement.

The Bali road map agreed to Saturday by delegates to the United Nations Framework Conference on Climate Change (UNFCCC) sets the deadline for a final climate deal in 2009 at Copenhagen. The ride there, no doubt, will be bumpy. "The Bali road map sets

out a process but it doesn't tell us where we'll wind up," head of The Nature Conservancy delegation Andrew Deutz said. "The science should have given us a clear picture of where we need to go. But the agreement doesn't paint a picture of the destination."

Strip away the rhetoric and posturing, and here's what Bali wrought: the nearly 190 participating countries agreed to work together to create a treaty by 2009 - to take effect in 2013, so the date could slide - that they can bring to their governments to ratify or reject. That treaty, if adopted, will likely bind only 38 industrialized countries to emissions guidelines. It will also pave the way for massive transfers of funds to developing countries, which may or may not be tied to their voluntary emissions reductions.

Although there was last-minute drama over technology transfer and a procedural matter, the major sticking point over the 12 days of talks was the US refusal to accept a target of 25%-to-40% reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2020 as part of the negotiating agenda. That item will only get more contentious over the next two years.

While its positions weren't all crowd pleasers, the US invited further criticism and disdain with its blatant

hypocrisy and tough rhetoric. Undersecretary of State for Democracy of Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, the US delegation head, continually professed her desire to reach consensus while rejecting consensus positions.

More quotably, White House Council on Environmental Quality chairman James Connaughton gave the latest formulation of President George W Bush's infamous, "If you're not with us, you're against us." Connaughton said, "The US will lead, and we will continue to lead, but leadership also requires others to fall in line and follow."

Not to be outdone for ludicrous posturing, others insisted that the process could not succeed without US participation, so therefore, the US had to adopt the positions laid out by the EU or developing nations.

Hidden in plain view

Amid all the double-speak and dissembling, the US obscured the most important part of its position: it will never accept a 25%-to-40% target for emissions cuts. That's the number the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, co-Nobel Prize winners with former US vice president Al Gore, suggests that in order to avoid an average global temperature rise of more than two degrees Celsius (four degrees Fahrenheit) that could bring more dramatic global climate changes.

"Decisions we make on climate change should be guided by science," Greenpeace International planet campaigner Stephanie Cunmore asserted, as did most of her colleagues from some 348 non-governmental organizations attending the Bali meeting.

"If scientists were being elected to lead our countries, I'd agree with that," co-director of the Harvard Project on International Climate Agreements Joseph Aldy said. "Scientists can tell us what to do, but in the end it's what politicians will agree to."

The Harvard project aims to identify key design elements of a scientifically sound, economically rational, and politically pragmatic post-2012 international policy architecture for global climate change, drawing from academia, private industry, government, and NGOs from around the world, in time for the 2008 UNFCCC meeting

in Poznan, Poland. "There's no way the US will agree to 25-to-40% cuts," Aldy asserted.

Many governments and NGOs are looking forward to the end of the Bush administration, around 400 days from now, for a change in US climate change policy. "The reality is there will be a US election and new president by 2009," TNC's Deutz said.

Aldy, a climate change specialist on Bill Clinton's Council of Economic Advisors and delegate to Kyoto, offered a reality check. "The most ambitious bills put forth by the most liberal members of Congress envision cutting back to 1990 levels by 2020," Aldy noted. "I cannot imagine any Republican or Democratic administration agreeing to more."

He pointed to several factors that make it easier for the rest of the world to chant the 25%-to-40% mantra, while the US, Japan and Canada find those figures unpalatable. The base year of 1990 means former Soviet bloc countries still had unprofitable, smoke belching state-owned industries that have since been shut down.

It also included coal-fired British power plants that were converted to natural gas later that decade. Aldy explained that with those changes, none directly related to climate change, "It's much easier for Europeans than for the US to get below 1990 levels." Another key US issue is that mandatory emissions targets would apply only to the 38 industrialized countries.

That leaves out three of the top four carbon-emitting nations, China, Indonesia and India, all classified as developing countries. The US believes that developing countries need to be subject to some mandatory emissions restrictions, albeit not the same ones as the industrialized countries. Otherwise, global emissions may well rise, no matter what the industrialized nations do.

But for many others, including developing countries and NGOs, the issue isn't just emissions, its climate justice. "Rich countries need to undo the damage they have done," Tear Fund advocacy director Andy Atkins said.

And climate justice means that not all emissions are

created equal. "There's a real commitment from China," WWF International director general James Leape said of the country soon to overtake the US as the top source of emissions. "China has a right to develop. It's in our interest to get China on a low carbon development path. [Premier] Wen Jiaobao is very vocal on this topic."

In essence, China wants to try to cut emissions through its own initiatives without limiting economic growth. It is ready to accept financial incentives and technology transfers to help it achieve that goal, but it is not willing to accept any international obligations that would restrict its emissions level. China would appear to be a good traveler along the Bali Road Map to combating climate change.

Another major emitter takes the same position as China, except that it's offering millions of dollars in financial incentives and technology transfers to other nations to help them lower emissions. That country is the US, and it's a major roadblock to progress. Expect a rough ride, more heated exchanges, and rising temperatures for participants and Mother Earth as the climate change circus heads down the Bali Road Map - and plenty more blinking if a treaty is actually to emerge in 2009.

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