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Copenhagen challenge

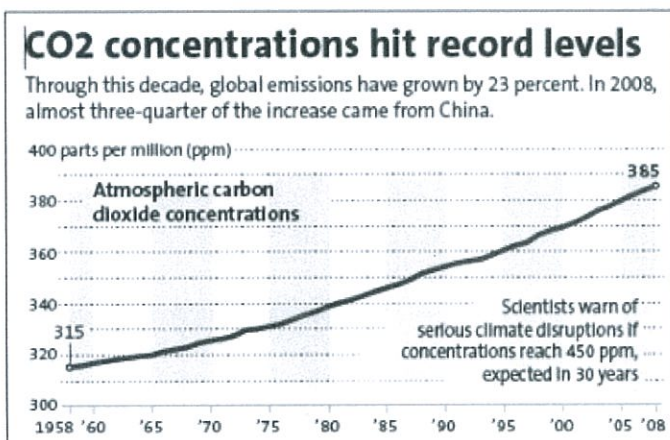
By ARTHUR MAX

The coming climate talks aim to forge a planet-wide deal on greenhouse gas emissions.

NEXT week's climate summit in Copenhagen, Denmark, seeks to transform the way the planet is run, from the production of energy, to the building of homes and cities, to the shaping of the landscape. It also would shift wealth from rich to poor countries in the process. No wonder a deal will be difficult to cut.

In recent weeks, prospects brightened, then dimmed, then revived again. The United States lifted hopes by signalling that President Barack Obama will in the Danish capital with a proposal to cut emissions by 17% from 2005 levels over the next decade. The number is drawn from bills awaiting congressional approval. Hoping to nudge negotiations off dead centre, principal governments have strengthened pledges to control their nations' greenhouse gases, the heat-trapping emissions blamed for global warming. Still, everyone is waiting to see what the United States will do.

Two years ago, when negotiations began, delegates anticipated a full treaty would be signed in Copenhagen to succeed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which set emissions limits on 37 industrial countries. The United States rejected Kyoto because it imposed no obligations on China, India and other rapidly emerging economies.



Sources: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; Scripps Institution of Oceanography

AP

Now the Danish hosts and the United Nations say it will be enough to nail down all the political elements, leaving the details, technical issues and legal language to be filled in over the following six months to a year.

Many developing countries say that is not good enough and insist Copenhagen aim for a full-fledged legal document. The divide over Copenhagen's goals reflects an abiding distrust among manufacturing powerhouses that built vast riches over 200 years, while spewing carbon dioxide and other industrial gases into the atmosphere, and countries still struggling to end hunger within their borders.

A new militant African bloc could complicate the Copenhagen negotiations. The 50 or so nations briefly walked out of committee meetings at the last round of talks in Spain early last month, alleging Western countries were not negotiating in good faith.

Whatever agreements emerge on Copenhagen's numerous issues, they must be accepted by all 192 countries. As in the Kyoto accord, whose emission reductions expire in 2012, these talks aim to negotiate 2020 reduction targets for industrial countries. Unlike Kyoto, developing countries will be asked to contribute by presenting detailed plans for shifting to low-carbon growth, although it is unclear how that would be written into the accord and whether they would be held to account for their promises.

The second crunch issue is money: how much wealthy countries will give poor countries to cope with climate change, whether major emerging economies should chip in to a global fund, and how it will be distributed and managed, giving developing countries an equal voice. Experts say US\$150bil (RM540bil) a year may be needed eventually.

Scientists say carbon emissions must level off by 2015 and then rapidly start to decline. Within 40 years, manmade emissions should be half what they were in 1990 – and 80 to 95% lower in the economically advanced countries – to avoid the worst scenarios of climate disasters.

"We are seeking nothing less than the transformation of our energy system," Jonathan Pershing, the chief US delegate, told negotiators at the final pre-Copenhagen round of talks.

Activists say that transformation must be comparable in scale to the Internet revolution: more wind, solar and nuclear energy, electric or biofuel cars and public transportation, smart electricity grids that reduce waste, concentrated high-rise cities that eliminate long commutes, an end to deforestation and more efficient carbon-storing agriculture.

The United Nations says the targets announced by industrial countries for 2020 add up to reductions of 16 to 23% below 1990 levels, far less than the 25 to 40% scientists say is needed.

In recent weeks some governments had increased their bids, while some developing countries promised energy reforms. – AP

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