

chicagotribune.com

Nations hash out climate deal

Nonbinding accord to cut emissions falls short of hopes

By Jim Tankersley

Tribune Newspapers

December 19, 2009

COPENHAGEN —Leaders of the world's largest economies agreed late Friday to take steps to curb greenhouse gas emissions, a hard-fought but admittedly incomplete victory for President Barack Obama, who nevertheless hailed the deal as an "unprecedented breakthrough" in the struggle to avert catastrophic climate change.

The agreement drew commitments from rich countries and emerging economic powers to corral the emissions scientists blame for global warming, along with an aid package that will ramp up to \$100 billion a year by 2020, which will help poor countries adapt to warming temperatures and transition to low-emission fuel sources. It includes a mechanism to verify compliance.

The agreement is not a legally binding treaty. Obama acknowledged several times that, as written, it would allow far more heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere than scientists consider safe to avert dangerous global warming.

It was also unclear Friday night how many poor nations, which have demanded strict climate action at the summit, would sign onto the deal.

"This progress did not come easily, and we know that this progress alone is not enough," Obama said in a late-evening news conference announcing the deal. He added: "We've come a long way, but we have much further to go."

Obama arrived Friday morning, immersed himself in negotiations, briefly addressed more than 100 other leaders and, after a hard day of bargaining with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, won concessions on both issues that had ground the talks to a near-standstill.

Obama secured pledges by fast-developing countries such as China and India to limit their harmful emissions as their economies grow. He also netted agreement on a system to subject those nations to international scrutiny of whether they are making good on their reduction pledges. Under the system, nations would report their emissions progress every two years, and other countries could ask to examine the data.

Obama worked out the details of those measures in an evening meeting with Wen and the leaders

of Brazil, India and South Africa, three other emerging economies.

Chinese officials flashed smiles and thumbs-up after Obama announced the deal. Many environmentalists also beamed at the news.

"It's a major step forward, because it dislodges the impasse" in global climate talks, said Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"The president spent the entire day ... getting the largest emitters in the world to agree to take the next step. It's not the step that people were hoping for, but it's a step forward."

Other groups viewed the agreement as a failure.

A protest group that has rallied throughout the summit called it "toothless." Oxfam International, which works on climate and poverty issues around the world, called it a "historic cop-out."

Kassie Siegel, director of the Climate Law Institute at The Center for Biological Diversity, said, "If this is the best we can do, it is not nearly good enough."

Obama cast the deal as a stepping stone to a new, official climate treaty down the road, and he addressed critics who faulted the deal for not being legally binding, suggesting that treaty enforcement mattered less than momentum.

"Everybody is taking as aggressive a set of actions as they can," he said

jtankersley@tribune.com

Terms of agreement

Here is what is known about the broad, nonbinding accord reached by the U.S., China, India, Brazil, South Africa and several other countries at the U.N. climate talks:

Cutting emissions:

--U.S., a 17 percent reduction from 2005 levels.

--China, a cut of 40 to 45 percent below "business as usual," that is, judged against 2005 figures for energy used versus economic output.

--India, 20 to 25 percent cut from 2005 levels

--European Union, 20 percent cut from 1990, and possibly 30 percent.

--Japan, 25 percent cut from 1990.

Verification

--Countries are to list actions taken to cut global warming pollution by specific amounts.

--Method is agreed upon for verifying reductions.

Funding

--Wealthy nations will raise \$100 billion a year by 2020 to help poorer nations cope with the effects of climate change, such as droughts and floods.

--Short-term funding of roughly \$30 billion over three years beginning in 2010 to help developing countries adapt to climate change and shift to clean energy.

-- Associated Press