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In Copenhagen, greens' love lost for Obama

By Shaun Tandon (AFP) – Dec 18, 2009

COPENHAGEN — US President Barack Obama's hesitant appearance in Copenhagen drew dismay Friday from environmentalists, conceding that the leader who once embodied their dreams is hamstrung politically.

Obama flew to the Danish capital on the final day of a high-stakes, 194-nation summit where he urged developing countries to come aboard a deal, even an imperfect one that can be built upon later.

But Obama offered no new US pledges of action, despite predictions by many in Copenhagen that he would spring a dramatic 11th-hour surprise to turn around the faltering talks.

"I was frankly surprised. I didn't think it was his strongest performance," said US Representative Earl Blumenauer, a staunch environmentalist in Obama's Democratic Party who came to Copenhagen with a congressional delegation.

"The fact is there was nothing new and maybe a little of a harsher tone," he told AFP.

"Maybe Copenhagen isn't his city," he said, referring to Obama's failed mission here to bring the Olympics to Chicago.

But Blumenauer noted that Obama has had a gruelling agenda during his first year in office including working to revive the troubled economy and bring health coverage to millions of uninsured Americans.

Reducing Obama's room to act, the US Senate has yet to follow the House of Representatives in approving the first nationwide US plan to curb emissions of carbon dioxide blamed for global warming.

"The process here is bad but what's happening in the US Senate makes this look like a model of efficiency," Blumenauer said.

The Obama administration says it has already done more than any other to combat global warming. Days ahead of the summit, it gave the Environmental Protection Agency the authority to regulate carbon dioxide even if the Senate does not act.

Obama has sharply shifted course from his predecessor George W. Bush, who vociferously opposed the current Kyoto Protocol and cast doubt on findings of UN scientists who say the world will face worsening droughts, floods and storms if rising temperatures go unchecked.

But Kassie Siegel of the Center for Biological Diversity, a US group fighting for endangered species, voiced shock at Obama's "take-it-or-leave-it" approach in Copenhagen compared with his stand a year ago.

"Obama the president is, when it comes to actual actions on climate, far closer to president Bush than Candidate Obama. The US and the world need Candidate Obama to re-emerge," she charged.

However, a Washington Post/ABC News poll released Friday found that Obama's position on global warming was becoming increasingly unpopular with the US public.

Only 39 percent supported the United States providing assistance to developing countries to cope with climate change -- a major component of any final deal.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Thursday announced a 100 billion-dollar plan for developing countries but was tight-lipped on how much the United States would provide and tied the funding to an overall deal in which nations' climate pledges would be subject to verification.

Developed nations say that rich countries should pay since they bear the most responsibility for greenhouse gases. But some members of Bush's Republican Party are adamantly opposed to such funding, fearing it would help emerging economic competitors.

Elliot Diringer, vice president for International Strategies at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, said Obama cannot be expected to seal a final Copenhagen deal after just 10 months of negotiations.

"He has really gone as far as he reasonably can at this stage," he said.

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