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Last round of UNFCCC climate talks before Copenhagen

Summary: The final round of official negotiations before COP 15 in Copenhagen took place in Barcelona 2-6 November 2009. Progress was made with respect to streamlining the negotiating text in the working group on long-term cooperative action. However, the working group developing the successor to the Kyoto Protocol experienced a stand off over emission reduction targets. Key political figures emphasised the need to 'lower expectations' for the much-hyped outcome of the Copenhagen conference, while others insisted an agreement will be reached claiming that it's not so much a matter of time than of political will.

Background

The seventh session of the Ad-hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA 7) and the ninth session of the Ad-hoc Working Group on Further Commitments for Annex I Parties under the Kyoto Protocol (AWG-KP 9) concluded in Barcelona 2-6 November 2009. These are the talks that commenced in Bangkok 28 September.

These sessions are otherwise known as the final round of official negotiations before the fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the UNFCCC at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009.

Progress on streamlining

Similar to the Bangkok talks, some progress was achieved on certain issues but there were no astounding breakthroughs. The AWG-LCA continued with its work to streamline the negotiating text for COP15, focussing on the key elements of the Bali Action Plan – adaptation, mitigation, finance, technology, capacity building and a shared vision for long-term cooperative action. It was commented that countries were now focussing more on more realistic 'needs' rather than 'wants'.

Continued disagreement on emission reduction targets post-2012

The AWG-KP encountered a resistance from the African Group who called for the suspension of other work until firm numbers had been agreed for the aggregate and individual emission reduction targets for developed countries. These targets would apply after the expiration of the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol ie from 2013. Conversely, developed countries argued that the methods by which these emission reductions could be achieved should be decided before numbers were assigned. Ultimately, no compromise could be reached. Details will now have to be thrashed out during informal meetings over the next month, if there is hope of agreement at the Copenhagen conference.

Anticipating Copenhagen Outcomes

The nature of the agreement expected in Copenhagen still remains unclear. There are currently two main approaches being pushed either:

- that Copenhagen deliver a single agreement encompassing the work of the AWG-LCA and the AWG-KP, which would include emission reduction targets for all developed countries as well as larger developing countries (this is being pushed by developed countries, particularly by the EU); or
- a binding amendment to the Kyoto Protocol and a separate agreement from the AWG-LCA, (this is being promoted by developing countries).

The United States

Some have accused the US of hiding behind the slow progress of its domestic climate legislation to avoid committing to anything on an international level. Further, Oxfam believes that many developed countries are using the US situation as an excuse for their own reluctance to sign up to higher reduction targets and pledge larger financing.

Dampened Expectations for Copenhagen

In the month between the Bangkok talks and the Barcelona talks, several key figures – including Yvo de Boer, Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC and Ed Miliband, UK Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change – have publicly stated that they are not expecting a *legally binding* agreement to be reached in Copenhagen, but rather a *political* agreement. The latter would in essence be a declaration of intent whose implementation and enforcement would then need to be developed at a later date.

'Agreement' is the key word

Despite gloomy prognosis from Bore and Miliband et al many key players have dismiss such statements as 'disheartening'. Andres Turesson, chief climate negotiator for Sweden, believes that the importance of Copenhagen is by no means diminished. He commented that any agreement reached must still contain the elements for future climate change action, outlining the institutions and binding commitments, and, most importantly, be backed by political resolve. This remains a challenge, but one that most parties concerned are intent on tackling.

Future developments:

- Many informal meetings are expected before Copenhagen, including a meeting of the Major Economies Forum (MEF), and a meeting of vulnerable countries in the Maldives. The dates are yet to be confirmed.
- 16-17 November: a 'pre-COP' meeting of ministers from several countries will be hosted by the Danish climate and energy minister.
- 7-18 December: Conference of the Parties 15 (COP 15) to the UNFCCC in Copenhagen.

References

1. IISD, Summary of the Barcelona Climate Change Talks: 2-6 November 2009, Earth Negotiations Bulletin, Vol. 12 No. 447, <http://www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/enb12447e.pdf>