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Latest UN climate talks seek to extend Kyoto Protocol

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The latest round of global climate talks began Monday in the Middle East, in one of the world's richest ?-in dollars and oil ?- nations.

The capital city of Doha, in Qatar, will for two weeks play host to the United Nations annual conference, officially known as the 18th Conference of the Parties and the 8th Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol.

The focus of the international meetings are expected to revolve around two areas: the Kyoto Protocol, which expires at the end of the year, and is the only binding agreement among nations to lower greenhouse gas emissions; and shoring up additional pledges from developed countries to aid developing nations in responding to climate change through adaptation and mitigation.

The 12-day gathering in Doha follows June's Rio+20 conference in Brazil on sustainability, and last year's U.N. climate talks in Durban, South Africa. Both conferences bore little in terms of concrete action, furthering criticism of the international talks' capability of seriously addressing climate change and limiting greenhouse gases.

In addressing the press on the opening day of negotiations in Qatar, Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, said the conference delegates entered Doha amid two realities:

It is very clear that over the past years, we have had more action on the ground, be it through investment in renewables, be it through domestic policy legislation, or any other way that you would like to measure it, we've had more policy on the ground, and we've had more international policy progress than we have had over the past 10 years.

However, the other reality is that the door is closing [fast], on us, because the pace and the scale of action is simply not yet where it must be," she said.

Figueres also outlined the agenda participating governments have established for the talks, including working toward a new universal agreement by 2015; speeding up technical and financial support to developing nations by implementing past agreements, such as the Bali Action Plan; and to reach a more clear understanding of the financial commitments of the Green Climate Fund, which set a goal of \$100 billion in support by 2020.

But the bulk of the work figures to focus on the Kyoto Protocol, specifically finalizing the negotiation stage of the first commitment period, and entering into the second commitment period, Figueres told the press.

The U.N. secretary said that such commitments would underscore "the trust that everyone must have that developed countries continue to take the lead in mitigation," while also preserving accounting rules "inherent in the Kyoto Protocol, which are the backbone of the environmental integrity of the system."

Agreed upon in Japan in Dec. 1997 and enforced starting in 2005, the Kyoto Protocol set binding emissions level targets for 37 industrialized nations, in an effort to cut combined emissions to five percent below 1990 levels. The first commitment period began in 2008 and ends Dec. 31.

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What was Kyoto's goal? To curb the rise of global temperatures to 2 degrees C, when compared to pre-industrial temps. A recent World Bank report projected, at the current pace, temperatures will rise up to 4 degrees C by 2100.

How the United States engages the Kyoto discussions will be closely watched. While President Barack Obama said in his re-election victory speech that "we want our children to live in an America " that isn't threatened by the destructive power of a warming planet," he has given little indication of committing to a Kyoto extension. The U.S., at the time led by George W. Bush, never signed onto the agreement, in part because other high emissions countries - China, India and Brazil (all considered developing nations) - were omitted the carbon-limiting protocol.

The world's advanced economic nations like the U.S. must take a lead in Doha, said Caritas Internationalis, a Catholic social justice organization, in order to protect the poor.

"The world's poorest and most vulnerable people, especially smallholder farmers in developing countries, who suffer the consequences of a problem others created, need to be at the heart of the climate negotiations, said Caritas secretary general Michael Roy in a press release. "But how are these talks supposed to advance if rich countries retract the promises made to support their efforts to adapt to climate change?"

Jonathan Pershing is the primary U.S. delegate in Doha. In speaking with the press Monday, Pershing

defended how America has engaged climate change, citing the president's higher fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks, and the country's aid to developing nations.

"It doesn't mean enough is being done," Pershing said, according to the Associated Press. "It's clear the global community, and that includes us, has to do more if we are going to succeed at avoiding the damages projected in a warming world."

Other coverage of COP 18:

- In the days leading up to the conference, U.N. secretary Figueres gave an extended interview to Yale Environment 360 [e360.yale.edu]
- How has the Arab world responded to climate change throughout its history? [AllAfrica.com]
- How does the oil-rich Doha rate as a host for climate change negotiations? [Telegraph.co.uk]

Check back at Eco Catholic and NCRonline.org for additional coverage as the U.N. climate talks in Doha, Qatar progress.

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