

CLIMATE DEAL ON A KNIFE EDGE AT THE 'ZOMBIE' CONFERENCE

The credibility of the UN climate change negotiating process hung in the balance last night, with ministers and officials from nearly 200 countries trying desperately to salvage some hope of a new international deal on countering global warming.

At stake is a package of measures ranging from a new forest treaty to a global Green Fund. The climate change negotiating process suffered a body blow from the collapse of the previous climate conference in Copenhagen last December. It would be unlikely to recover from a second failure.

Britain's Energy and Climate Change Secretary, Chris Huhne, said he was "cautiously optimistic" that a deal would be struck. (...) New language had been found, he said, which might make possible a way forward between two entrenched positions. Japan and Russia are refusing to sign up to a renewed Kyoto which would oblige the rich countries to make tough cuts in greenhouse gas emissions while demanding nothing in return from the poor, developing countries. The developing nations, on the other hand, led by Bolivia and Venezuela, are insisting on a "Kyoto 2" as part of any deal.

(...) Potential difficulties last night involved Venezuela, which was still insisting on renewing Kyoto, and Bolivia, which was refusing to accept any reference to markets in the forest treaty. As the chief purpose of the forest treaty is to create a vast new market in carbon credits by keeping forests unlogged, this was something of a problem.

However, there were grounds for optimism after the Japanese, who have refused to countenance an extension of Kyoto, softened their language.(...) A Downing Street spokesman said: "Mr Cameron stressed the importance to the Japanese premier of an ambitious outcome to the Cancun talks."

Mr Cameron's intervention was unusual, in that the world's senior national leaders have kept clear of Cancun, presumably because they have not wanted to risk being associated with another Copenhagen-style failure. Their absence has led to the talks being labelled the "zombie conference". Cancun has seen no one of the rank of President Obama, Nicolas Sarkozy of France or Angela Merkel of Germany, although about 30 national leaders have made an appearance – notably those representing the Association of Small Island States, which are particularly threatened by the rise in sea levels associated with global warming, and other countries at risk from climate change.

The absence of senior leaders means that if the conference does fail to reach an agreement, there will be no possibility of patching together an ad-hoc deal, as was done between heads of state at Copenhagen. Instead, the failure could be irrevocable.

Adapted from *The Independent*
December 2010
(2 709 characters)