

Pacific rim nations eke out climate agreement

AFP, Sydney

Asia Pacific countries have agreed a common statement on climate change after intense wrangling between rich and emerging nations, a source involved in the talks said Friday.

The document, which is not binding, contains an "aspirational" target of reducing energy intensity but also stresses the primacy of the United Nations in the fight against climate change.

Drafted by experts of the 21-member Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, the six-page text now goes for approval to Apec leaders meeting this weekend at a summit in Sydney.

The source, a senior Southeast Asian official who was closely involved in the negotiations, said the statement urges nations to reduce energy intensity by 25

percent by 2030 but does not make an enforceable commitment.

"It is an aspirational goal, not a binding commitment," the source added. "Even though there is a numerical target, Apec is not a binding organisation."

He also said the statement was "formulated in such a way that it does not prejudice" the UN process.

Australia had touted a tough stance on climate change, which would draw in emerging nations to make cuts in greenhouse gases, as a cornerstone of the gathering.

But it triggered a fierce debate here, with emerging nations led by China saying they did not want to be bound by any commitments.

They said all attention should be focused on a UN climate change conference in Bali in December, which aims to lay the groundwork

for a treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol on curbing emissions.

"We cannot pre-judge the results of the Bali meeting," the official said. "The UNFCCC is like a Bible," referring to the UN meeting.

The bickering was all part of a wider tussle to shape the framework of a successor to Kyoto, which was signed under the auspices of the United Nations in 1997 but runs out in 2012.

What also irked environmental activists was that Australia and the United States are the only two industrialised nations to have refused to ratify that landmark UN accord.

Australia, backed by the United States, said Kyoto was basically flawed as it did not commit emerging nations, notably China and India with their booming economies, to make cuts in emissions, and that any replacement treaty had to close

the loophole.

US President George W. Bush said here earlier this week that for any fresh accord to be effective, "China needs to be at the table."

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had appeared upbeat earlier Friday as the "very difficult" negotiations went down to the wire.

"If we can get a good declaration out of this, that would be a very great achievement. But I make no predictions about how those negotiations will go. We're still working at it," he said.

Chinese President Hu Jintao spearheaded the opposition, insisting Thursday that the United Nations must take the lead in agreeing a new treaty.

Philippines President Gloria Arroyo, too, said Friday that the proper way ahead was via the Bali conference.



PHOTO: AFP

Environmental activists demonstrate at Bondi beach in Sydney yesterday aiming to allure the attention of world leaders attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum taking place in Australia's largest city on climate change. Australian Prime Minister John Howard had put climate change at the top of the agenda for a weekend summit of Pacific Rim leaders here as a way to shape the debate on how to tackle global warming.

Australia, Russia sign uranium deal

AFP, Sydney

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Australian Prime Minister John Howard on Friday signed a landmark deal for the export of uranium to the nuclear superpower.

"This new agreement will allow the supply of Australian uranium for use in Russia's civil nuclear power industry and provide a framework for broader cooperation on peaceful nuclear-related activities," Howard said.

Speaking at a joint press conference with Putin, Howard moved to allay fears that sales of yellowcake, set to be used in domestic Russian civilian reactors, would pose a potential nuclear risk.

While Australia could reportedly begin exporting its yellowcake to Russia as early as next year, the agreement means Russia would not be allowed to sell the fuel to any other nation or use it for military purposes.

"Any uranium that is sold to Russia will be sold under very strict safeguards," Howard said after

meeting the Russian leader in Sydney, where both will attend a weekend Asia Pacific summit.

Howard dismissed claims that Australian uranium could be sold on to third nations, fuelling nuclear proliferation and possibly falling into the wrong hands.

"My attitude to the assessment is that they are wrong," he said.

Putin, who earlier Friday became the first ever Russian or Soviet head of state to come down under, also dismissed fears that Russia would sell on Australian uranium.

He said Russia already exports large quantities of enriched uranium for military use, including 30 tonnes a year to the United States, so Moscow had no need to sell Australian yellowcake.

"I simply don't understand what people are talking about," he told reporters. "We are buying uranium from Australia for purely economic reasons."

But environmentalists said Australia could be helping fuel nuclear proliferation.

Benazir warns Musharraf of uprising if no deal comes through

PTI, New York

With her much-touted power-sharing deal with President Pervez Musharraf yet to materialise, former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto has warned the General that failure to reach an agreement with her could prompt a "people's uprising" in the country.

"It is up to the government to decide whether it wants a peaceful transition to democracy through free and fair elections or face people's power" and a "Ukrainian-style Orange Revolution in Pakistan," Benazir Bhutto told a paper in a telephone interview from Dubai.

Protests had erupted in Ukraine in 2005 following allegations that the government had rigged elections and ended only after opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko took over.

Her power-sharing effort, Benazir Bhutto told the Wall Street Journal, was designed to achieve a "peaceful transition" to democracy

and a stronger balance between the powers of the President and Parliament.

"This is such a roller coaster that one cannot be sure about the final outcome," Benazir Bhutto said. "Musharraf is sincere, but there are some vested interests who do not want to see a peaceful transition from military rule to democracy."

The 56-year-old former two-term prime minister is trying to return from self-exile through negotiations with Musharraf and both the leaders, the paper said, are under pressure to reach a deal ahead of Monday's scheduled return of Nawaz Sharif, whose democratically elected government was ousted by the General eight years ago.

"Pakistan's unity is at stake because of terrorism and religious extremists," Benazir Bhutto said. "So, need for unity among the moderate and liberal forces is much greater today."

N Korea invites 3 nations for nuke survey

AP, Sydney

At the invitation of North Korea, nuclear experts from the US, China and Russia will travel to the communist country next week to survey nuclear facilities to be shut down, the chief US negotiator to six-nation nuclear talks announced yesterday.

Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill said that the delegation of experts from the three nuclear powers would go to North Korea on Tuesday for a four-day survey "of nuclear facilities to be disabled."

"This is an idea the North Koreans came up with," Hill told reporters. He said it was hoped that the full review would be completed by Dec. 31.

He said the overture by North Korea marked "another significant step toward the goal of de-nuclearisation" of the Korean peninsula.

Pakistan deports Briton detained for suspected al-Qaeda links

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has deported a British man held without charge here for more than a year and tortured on suspicion of links to al-Qaeda, a leading rights group said yesterday.

Rangzieb Ahmed was arrested in August 2006 in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province but was never charged with any crime. New York-based Human Rights Watch said.

Ahmed alleged that he was interrogated several times by US law enforcement personnel from unidentified agencies and interviewed by British security services during his incarceration, it said.

He was released this week on the orders of the country's Supreme Court, which is hearing multiple cases of missing persons, most of them in the custody of the country's powerful intelligence agencies.



PHOTO: AFP
Supporters of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) hang up the posters of their leaders, deposed Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother Shahbaz Sharif outside their office in Lahore yesterday ahead of their anticipated return to Pakistan. A Pakistani court ordered the arrest of the brother of former premier Nawaz Sharif, while Sharif too faces detention on the pair's planned return from exile on September 10.

US commander in Iraq backs gradual troop cut

Bleak reports on Iraq fuel senate debate

AFP, AP, Washington

General David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq, will recommend a gradual reduction of US forces beginning next spring in his eagerly anticipated testimony to Congress next week, the Boston Globe reported yesterday.

"Based on the progress our forces are achieving, I expect to be able to recommend that some of our forces will be redeployed without replacement," Petraeus told the Globe in an email from Baghdad.

"That will, over time, reduce the total number of troops in Iraq. The process will take time, but we want to be sure to maintain the security gains that coalition and Iraqi forces have worked so hard to achieve," he said.

The force reduction Petraeus forecast will come as the five additional brigades deployed to Iraq as part of President George W. Bush's

"surge" strategy end their tours of duty over the spring and summer, and are not replaced, the daily said. A brigade consists of 3,500 to 4,500 soldiers.

"The bottom line is that ... I do not envision that the US would need to send more troops," he was quoted as saying. "In fact, we are in the process of doing the 'battlefield geometry' to determine the way ahead as the surge of forces inevitably runs its course."

There are currently 168,000 US troops in Iraq, including the 30,000 "surge" troops deployed to help stabilize Baghdad and the restive Al-Anbar province.

Beginning Monday, Petraeus and the US ambassador in Iraq, Ryan Crocker, will testify about the war's progress to the Democratic-controlled Congress amid growing calls for the beginning of a withdrawal.

Meanwhile, reports that offer a bleak picture of Iraq's political

climate and the performance of its security forces are providing fresh impetus for Democrats calling for US troop withdrawals.

An independent panel led by retired Marine Gen. James Jones recommended that the Iraqis assume more control of their nation's security and that US forces, seen as an occupying and permanent force, should step back. Its report, presented to Congress on Thursday, contended that "significant reductions, consolidations and realignments would appear to be possible and prudent."

The Jones panel also found that Iraq's security forces would be unable to take control in the next 12 months to 18 months and recommended that its national police force be scrapped and entirely rebuilt because of corruption and sectarianism.

US troops join search for Felix dead

AP, Puerto Cabezas

The death toll from Hurricane Felix neared 100 Thursday night as US, Honduran and Nicaraguan soldiers searched remote jungle beaches and the open sea for survivors and the dead. Villagers in canoes helped, paddling through waters thick with fallen trees.

Two days after the storm hit, dozens more bodies were recovered along the Miskito coastline that stretches across the Nicaragua-Honduras border, many found floating in the sea, emergency officials said.

Abelino Cox, a spokesman for the Regional Emergency Committee, said the death toll from Felix had risen to at least 98. The previous toll was at least 65 dead.

The storm also destroyed the ethnic Zumo and Mayagna Indian community of Awastigni, located 55 miles northwest of Puerto Cabezas, Cox said. Fourteen people from there were missing.



PHOTO: AFP
Aerial picture showing destroyed houses and knocked-down trees in the village of Sandy Bay, in the Nicaraguan province of Raan on Thursday, where Felix slammed ashore from the Caribbean. Nicaragua, Honduras and Mexico geared up for flooding from rain-swollen rivers Thursday in the wake of two devastating hurricanes that left at least 100 victims dead and scores more missing.

Mamata mulls snapping ties with NDA

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Has Trinamool Congress finally made up its mind to snap ties with BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)?

Well, it has been in the air for some months now and maverick party supremo Mamata Banerjee indicated in Kolkata on Thursday that she is preparing to part ways with BJP. And she chose to do this at a meeting with a group of madrasa students.

"We are now with no one and are trying to stand on our own," Mamata said adding her party was carrying on the agitation against West Bengal's Left Front government's bid to acquire farmland for setting up industries. "In West Bengal, we are going it alone. It is a conscious decision and we are going to stick to it in the coming days," she added.

Political analysts say Mamata's remarks are an attempt to woo Muslim votes, who comprise 27 percent of West Bengal's electorate, ahead of speculation in political circles about fresh parliamentary elections much earlier than scheduled in 2009.

Ties between Mamata's party and BJP in West Bengal have remained all but snapped for some years now, especially after Trinamool Congress rebuffed any seat adjustment with BJP in the last state assembly elections in the state. However, at the national level, Mamata has not made any formal announcement about her party's exit from NDA.

In the past too, Mamata had

given the impression of distancing her party from NDA by staying away from alliance meetings for months together before Trinamool Congress representatives returning to such exercises.

Recently, Trinamool Congress did not vote in presidential elections in which BJP had put up its senior leader Bhairo Singh Shekhawat. Mamata's party had rooted for a second term to APJ Abdul Kalam as President.

Mamata, however, sought to emphasise that her "political compulsions" in West Bengal or at the national level or her personal respect for BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee has got nothing to do with her relations with Muslims.

The Congress party in West Bengal was quick to welcome Mamata's remarks at the meeting with madrasa students.

West Bengal Congress legislature party leader Manas Bhuniya said his party would like Mamata to return to the Congress fold, which she had quit in 1997.

At this moment, Mamata's return or formal alliance with Congress is unlikely ahead of next general elections.

So far, Mamata has not aligned with Congress despite several overtures by Congress and the fact senior leaders of that party like Pranab Mukherjee and Priyaranjan Dasgupta are believed to be in touch with her. Mamata has also not made any formal announcement to leave NDA despite repeated pleas by Congress.