



US President Barack Obama makes remarks at United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's summit on climate change at United Nations headquarters on Tuesday in New York City. The summit focusing on harmful global emissions coincided with the 64th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

Obama, China vow urgent action on climate change

AP, United Nations

President Barack Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao each vowed urgent action Tuesday to cool an overheating planet, even as prospects dimmed for a full treaty by the end of the year.

The world's two biggest greenhouse-gas polluting nations were the focus at the UN's unprecedented daylong climate change summit, which drew more than 50 presidents and 35 prime ministers, along with many environment ministers and at least one prince.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opened the gathering with an appeal to leaders to set aside national interests and think about the future of the globe and a rebuke for their foot-dragging thus far.

"The climate negotiations are proceeding at glacial speed. The world's glaciers are now melting faster than human progress to protect them and us," the UN chief said.

Failure to reach a new international pact on climate change "would be morally inexcusable, economically shortsighted and politically unwise," Ban

warned. "The science demands it. The world economy needs it."

At the end of the summit, however, Ban and Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, who will host the treaty talks, said they were encouraged at the prospects. "This feeling of political momentum that was very strong," said Løkke Rasmussen.

Tuesday's UN gathering and the G-20 summit in Pittsburgh this week are seen as an attempt to pressure rich nations to commit to a global climate treaty at Copenhagen, Denmark, in December, and to pay for poorer nations to burn less coal and preserve their forests.

With a mere 76 days to go before the pivotal conference, it appeared an interim agreement might be the most that could be expected in December, leaving difficult details for later talks.

"We are on the path to failure if we continue to act as we have," French President Nicolas Sarkozy cautioned.

Much attention was fixed on Obama's first UN speech, in which he pledged the United States is "determined to act."

"The threat from climate change is serious, it is urgent, and it is growing," Obama said, after receiving loud applause. "And the time we have to reverse this tide is running out."

But while Obama campaigned for the presidency vowing to push through stringent cuts in US emissions, he has run up against stiff resistance among Republicans, and the Senate most likely won't have written climate legislation until after the Copenhagen meeting.

By comparison, Hu runs a command economy and was unencumbered by political opposition. He outlined an ambitious programme that included plans to plant enough forest to cover about 150,000 square miles, an area the size of Montana, and generate 15 percent of its energy needs from renewable sources within a decade.

He said the communist system would also take steps to improve energy efficiency and reduce "by a notable margin" its growth rate of carbon pollution as measured against economic growth though he did not give any specific numerical targets.

US can't solve the planet's problems alone: Obama

AP, New York

Seizing a chance to challenge the world, President Barack Obama says the global community is failing its people and fixing that is not "solely America's endeavour."

"Those who used to chastise America for acting alone in the world cannot now stand by and wait for America to solve the world's problems alone," Obama said in a passage of the speech he was delivering Wednesday to the United Nations General Assembly.

The White House released excerpts in advance that carried a remarkably blunt tone.

It comes in Obama's first speech to this world body, a forum like none other for a leader hoping to wash away

any lasting images of US unilateralism under George W. Bush.

In essence, Obama's message is that he expects plenty in return for reaching out.

"We have sought in word and deed a new era of engagement with the world," Obama said, echoing the cooperative theme he promised as a candidate and has since used as a pillar of his foreign policy. "Now is the time for all of us to take our share of responsibility."

He said if the world is honest with itself, it has fallen woefully short.

"Extremists sowing terror in pockets of the world," Obama said. "Protracted conflicts that grind on and on. Genocide and mass atrocities. More and more nations with nuclear weapons. Melting ice

caps and ravaged populations. Persistent poverty and pandemic disease."

The president added, "I say this not to sow fear, but to state a fact: the magnitude of our challenges has yet to be met by the measure of our action."

Obama's speech is the centrepiece of a day in which he was also holding pivotal meetings with the new Japanese prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama, and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

Immersed in a packed agenda here, Obama foreshadowed his message to world leaders in a speech Tuesday to the Clinton Global Initiative. He spoke of nations interconnected by problems, whether a flu strain or an economic collapse or a drug trade that crosses borders.

Ahmadinejad urges Obama to see Iran as a 'friend'

AP, New York

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad urged President Barack Obama to see Iran as a potential friend instead of a threat ahead of addresses both leaders will give to the United Nations General Assembly yesterday.

The Iranian leader also said in a wide-ranging Associated Press interview Tuesday that he expects "free and open" discussion of nuclear issues at a meeting next week with six world powers, but stressed that his country would not negotiate on its own nuclear plans.

He sought to open a wider nuclear dialogue with the West, and said the onus should be on the United

States and other major nuclear powers to give up their weapons and to expand opportunities for all countries to make peaceful use of nuclear power.

Speaking to AP reporters and editors just hours after arriving in the United States, Ahmadinejad said he will seek a quick resolution to the case of three American hikers jailed in Iran.

He dismissed last week's US shift away from a planned long-range missile shield in Europe, meant to guard against an Iranian strike, as "a respectful way of buying out" Russian objections.

"I heard Obama saying the next threat is Iran. Iran is an opportunity for everyone," Ahmadinejad said.



PHOTO: AFP

Amnesty International's Secretary General Bangladeshi-born Irene Khan (C) stands by a patient as she paid a visit to a hospital on Tuesday in Freetown. Irene Khan is leading a high level mission in Sierra Leone from Sept 18 to 25 to launch a campaign to reduce maternal deaths in the country, which has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

Robbers use chopper to raid Sweden cash depot

AP, Stockholm

Robbers used a stolen helicopter and explosives to engineer a spectacular raid on a cash depot in Stockholm on Wednesday, breaking into the building through the roof and flying off with bags of cash, police and officials said.

The daring pre-dawn heist stunned police in the Swedish capital, who were unable to deploy their own helicopters to the scene because suspected explosives had been placed at their hangar.

The security company that owns the facility, G4S PLC, said the thieves had made off with "an unconfirmed sum of money" and added it would offer a large reward for information leading to their arrest and the return of the loot. The company did not give an exact amount for the reward.

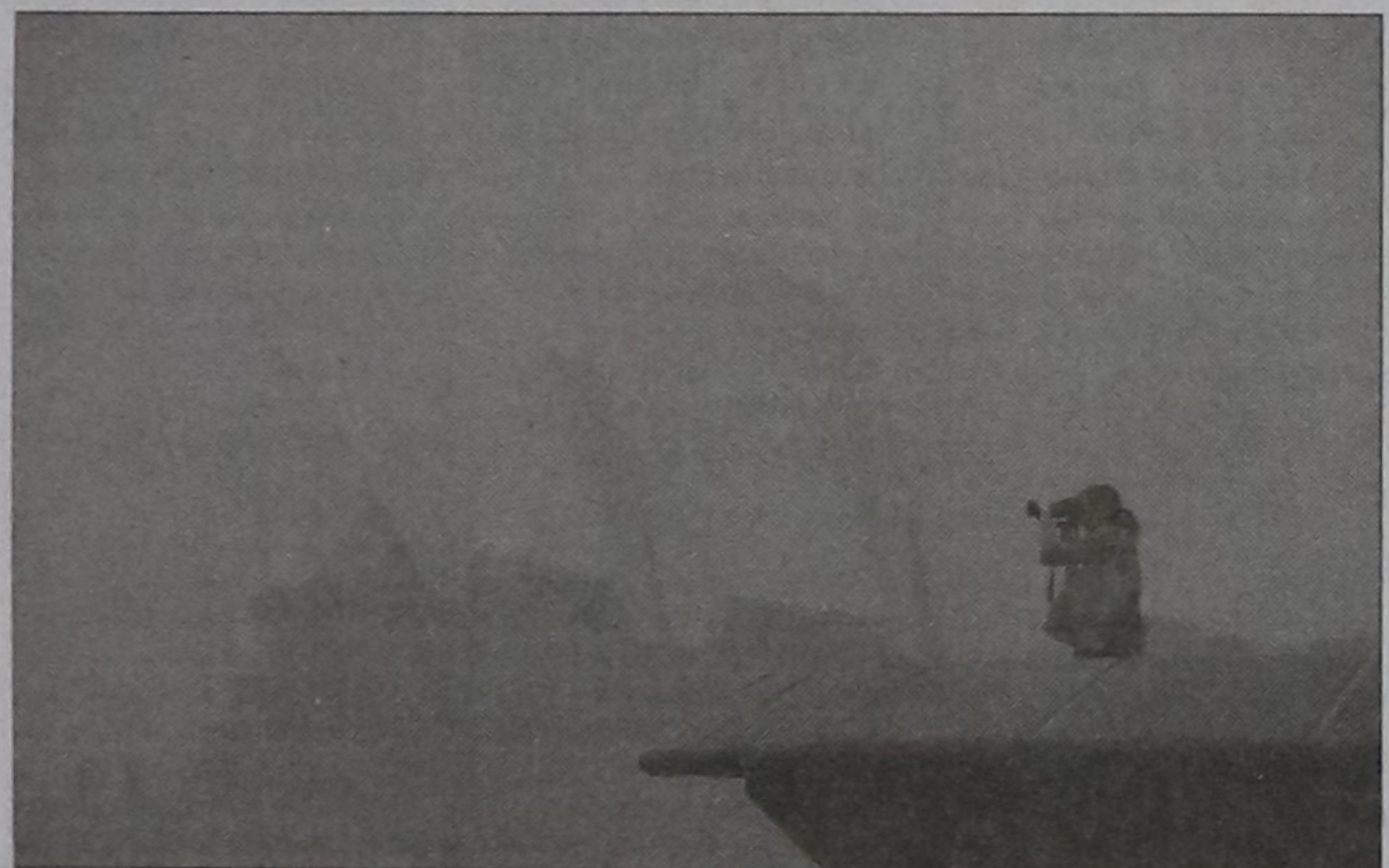


PHOTO: AFP

A woman takes a photograph as the Sydney Opera House (C) is shrouded in an eerie blanket of dust yesterday. Sydney's cars and buildings turned orange as strong winds blew desert dust across the city, snarling commuter and air transport and prompting a warning for children and the elderly to stay indoors.

Sydney dust storm sparks flight chaos, health worries

AP, Sydney

Australia's worst dust storm in 70 years blanketed the heavily populated east coast Wednesday in a cloud of red Outback grit, nearly closed the country's largest airport and left millions of people coughing and sputtering in the streets.

No one was hurt as a result of the pall that swept in overnight, bringing an eerie orange dawn to Sydney, but ambulance services reported a spike in emergency calls from people with breathing difficulties, and police warned drivers to take it easy on the

roads.

Dust clouds blowing east from Australia's dry interior parched even further by the worst drought on record covered dozens of towns and cities in two states as strong winds snatched up tons of topsoil, threw it high into the sky and carried it hundreds of kilometres.

International flights were diverted from Sydney to other cities three from New Zealand were turned around altogether and domestic schedules were thrown into chaos as operations at Sydney Airport were curtailed by unsafe visibility levels.

Quake kills 12 in Bhutan

AFP, Guwahati

Rescue teams fanned out over remote eastern Bhutan Tuesday to assess damage and look for trapped survivors as the death toll from a strong earthquake rose to 12, a government official said.

The 6.1-magnitude quake early afternoon on Monday triggered landslides, damaged over 100 houses, several school buildings and Buddhist monasteries and sent rocks tumbling down steep mountain slopes.

Five people died in the Munggar region near the epicentre in eastern Bhutan, including three women and a two-year-old child, with three other victims found in nearby Trashigang district and four Indian workers in Samdrup Jhonkhar.

"Rescue teams have man-

aged to reach interior areas and are assessing the damage and also looking for anyone who might require medical support or could be trapped," said government official TM Dorji.

Thousands of people in the eastern districts spent the night out in the open after the quake damaged homes, Bhutan's Kuensel newspaper reported, and 20 people were reported to have been admitted to hospital.

"Some of the monasteries were damaged and monks and other people simply fled the worship places out of fear," said T Dorji, a resident of Trashigang district.

The tremors from Monday's quake were felt in northeastern India and residents were given another fright early Tuesday when a quake in neighbouring Myanmar rippled through the region.



PHOTO: AFP

Handout picture taken yesterday shows Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV)-C14 is being launched from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC) in Sriharikota.

US weighs less ambitious options in Afghan war

AFP, Washington

As President Barack Obama weighs his options for the Afghan war, some lawmakers and analysts are pushing more modest strategies that would require a smaller US force and rely more on drones.

The top commander of US and Nato forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, has warned Obama that without addi-

tional US troops the Nato-led mission will face defeat at the hands of Islamist insurgents.

But skeptics in Congress and inside the administration are searching for alternatives to Nato's costly counter-insurgency campaign, saying the goal of countering al-Qaeda militants might be achieved with a less ambitious approach.

"There are a number of what might be called 'middle

way' proposals that are circulating around," Stephen Biddle, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, told AFP.

With Obama's fellow Democrats as well as Republicans in Congress increasingly "uncomfortable" with the direction of the war and growing public opposition, Biddle said: "There is lots of interest in somehow doing less."

India's tiger protection plan 'failing': Experts

AFP, New Delhi

India's efforts to stop poaching of its endangered tigers are failing despite millions of dollars of funding, a new protection force and experiments with animal transfers, experts say.

The federal government swung into action in 2007 after India's tiger population plunged to just 1,350 -- just over a third of the 3,700 estimated to be alive in 2002.

A new tiger conservation

plan chalked out some bold and urgent steps to end the poaching menace, move forest dwellers away from reserves and transfer tigers from one reserve to another while monitoring their movements.

Wildlife experts and directors of the 38 Indian tiger reserves met in Delhi last week for a conference on the highly-prized animals which were estimated to once number about 40,000 before independence from Britain in 1947.



PHOTO: AFP

This file photo taken on March 23, 2009 shows a dead Royal Bengal Tiger tied up as a crowd gathers at the Kaliabor Police Station in the Nagaon district of Assam, after it was shot dead for killing two people and injuring two others. India's efforts to stop poaching of its endangered tigers are failing despite millions of dollars of funding, a new protection force and experiments with animal transfers, experts say.

Rights groups call for putting pressure on Lanka over refugees

AFP, Colombo

Human rights groups urged world leaders yesterday to pressure Sri Lanka over the immediate resettlement of quarter of a million war-displaced civilians held in state-run camps.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said the upcoming UN general assembly as well as the G-20 economic summit in Pittsburgh should address the plight of an estimated 260,000 people con-

fined to camps in the island's north after the decades-long conflict against Tamil Tiger rebels ended in May.

"World leaders should support calls from the UN to restore full freedom of movement to these people, who already have suffered mightily from war and displacement," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

"The civilians locked up in these detention camps have a right to liberty now, not when the government gets around to it."

India heads for worst drought since 1972

AFP, New Delhi

India's monsoon was about 20 percent below strength just over a week before the official end of the rainy season, putting the country on course for its worst drought since 1972, weather data showed yesterday.

"Until September 21, for the country as a whole, the rain deficiency was 22 percent," said BK Bandyopadhyay, a spokesman for the weather office.

"We expect the total rain

deficiency will be roughly about 20 percent (at the end of the monsoon season). It depends on the rainfall, but it seems it will be around this number," he added.

Low rainfall early in the monsoon period ravaged India's rice, cane sugar and groundnut crops, and has disrupted the flow of water into the main reservoirs that are vital for hydropower generation and winter irrigation.

The drought is expected to dampen India's economic

growth this year and has sent food prices rocketing, leading to huge hardship for India's poor masses.

Chicken prices, for instance, rose 16 percent in the week to September 5 and fruit and vegetables climbed eight percent from the previous week, official data shows.

In August, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh admitted that the country faced a "severe drought" but he said that ample food grain stock would ensure no one went hungry.

Afghan officials live in fear of Taliban killers

AP, Kabul

During his two years as a provincial governor in Afghanistan, Arsalah Jamal survived four suicide attacks.

Once, a Taliban bomber dressed as a doctor struck as Jamal dedicated a hospital wing. Twice, car bombs slammed into his convoy. Another time, an attacker blew himself up at a funeral Jamal was attending for a

fellow governor killed in another blast.

Jamal, 45, escaped harm each time, but he resigned late last year as governor of the eastern province of Khost and moved his family to Canada a victory for the Taliban and its campaign to intimidate and assassinate Afghan officials.

Assassinations have intensified this year, with more than 100 officials and pro-government tribal elders

attacked half of them fatally. Echoing a strategy of insurgents in Iraq, such killings sow fear, undermine the already weak government and make it difficult to fill official posts with educated and competent Afghans.

"The Taliban know that if you kill one guy in the government, it discourages another 10 from being in that job," said Jamal, who returned to Kabul this year to work for President Hamid Karzai's re-election.