



PHOTO: AFP
Greenpeace activists carry a sample of earth during a mock funeral procession with the message "Climate Failure not an option" and "Act now - Save our Future" - during a protest in New Delhi yesterday.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Do UN climate talks need world leaders at the table?

AFP, Copenhagen

As the world takes stock of the 11-hour climate deal hammered out in the Danish capital, many diplomats and experts are asking if injecting leaders into the negotiating process was, on balance, a boon or a blunder.

The question is pertinent, because it is now all too clear that the Copenhagen Accord was not the planet-saving end point once advertised.

Rather, it has become just another way station on the long and winding road toward what most countries claim to want: a legally-binding treaty to beat back the terrible threat of global warming.

Now negotiators and NGOs alike are pinning their hopes on the next big climate rendezvous a year from now, in Mexico City.

Many argue that having world leaders at the table is what saved the day in Copenhagen, even if the end result fell worryingly short of what science says is needed.

"Before the heads of state arrived, we were done for," said Brice Lalonde, France's climate ambassador.

"They took risks, some worked all night. They really rolled up their sleeves," he told AFP.

"I think it's the first time that leaders have really lived up to their responsibilities" on climate, added Lalonde, who stands astride the forbiddingly technical talks and top-level geo-strategic dialogue.

Robert Orr, Assistant Secretary General for policy planning at the United Nations, also had a front-row seat during the dramatic cascade of improvised multi-lateral mini-summits -- at times running side-by-side -- that sealed the deal.

"The process we witnessed, a wild rollercoaster ride, is unprecedented. Never before have world leaders been annexed to the 'normal' negoti-

ating process," he told a small group of journalists Friday evening even as the talks were underway.

Having frontline negotiators, ministers and leaders in the same room was, at times, "pretty confusing," Orr said.

"But the biggest innovation that made this deal work was bringing leaders into the process."

"Usually it's prearranged, it's pre-cooked -- finished texts go to the leaders, they nod at each and they sign," he said.

"This was not the case here. Leaders were drafting, caucusing, doing things that most of them probably hadn't done in years."

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, departing from a prepared speech delivered at the conference, said the experience reminded him of his early days as a union leader haggling with industry bosses.

Orr suggested the UN might "draw lessons" from Copenhagen on "how to get that alchemy just right."

For Alden Meyer, a climate policy analyst at the Washington-based Union of Concerned Scientists, having more than 130 heads of state -- the largest UN summit ever -- join the fray was a mixed blessing at best.

"Their presence generated a tremendous amount of attention. Climate is clearly a geo-political issue of the first order now," he said.

The fear of a highly-visible failure also helped ensure that the crunch summit would yield an accord.

But the intense closed-door talks also created confusion and, more critically, uneven results, Meyer argued.

One telling detail: the final text has no reference point for the goal of keeping average global temperatures from rising more than 2.0 Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), widely seen by scientists as the threshold of dangerous warming.

Israel close to prisoner swap

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his top ministers on Monday debated whether to approve an emotionally charged deal to trade 1,000 Palestinian prisoners for an Israeli soldier held by Gaza militants for more than three years.

Netanyahu and six ministers had met three times on Sunday, and again on Monday

morning. Army Radio reported that an afternoon gathering was planned. With the group divided over the proposed deal, Netanyahu could well bring the final decision to a vote in his full Cabinet.

At a protest tent outside the prime minister's official residence, dozens of demonstrators carried cardboard cutouts of the captured soldier, 23-year-old Sgt. Gilad Schalit, and urged Cabinet ministers to

wrap up an agreement.

A deal, if approved, could dramatically improve the standing of the Gaza Strip's Islamic militant Hamas rulers among Palestinians and herald an easing of the blockaded territory's crippling isolation. The chief loser could be Hamas' bitter rival, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is backed by the West but whose popularity has suffered at home.

US healthcare overhaul clears key Senate test

AP, Washington

President Barack Obama's planned reform of healthcare, his top domestic goal, cleared a key Senate hurdle yesterday with no room to spare and seemed set to pass by his self-imposed Christmas deadline.

After hours of bitter debate, all 58 Democrats and their two independent allies closed

ranks in a vote shortly after 1:00 am (0600 GMT) to get exactly the 60 senators needed to end debate on a landmark compromise bill.

"What's really killing more and more Americans every day is complications from our health care system," Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said in the final speech before the ballot.



PHOTO: AFP
Russian Soyuz TMA-17 rocket blasts off to the International Space Station from the launchpad at Baikonur cosmodrome on Sunday.

Astronauts blast off for Christmas space mission

AP, Baikonur

A Russian rocket blasted off from a cosmodrome in Kazakhstan lighting up the frigid Central Asian steppe Monday, shuttling an American, a Russian and a Japanese to the International Space Station.

Standing in the early morning cold, the astronauts' family and friends watched as the Soyuz craft soared atop a tower of bright orange flames.

The Soyuz TMA-17's three astronauts will take the orbiting laboratory's permanent crew to five following the early-hours launch, the first-ever blastoff of a Soyuz rocket on a winter night.

Thousands turn out for funeral of Iranian dissident

AFP, Tehran

Thousands of mourners on Monday attended the funeral of Iran's top dissident cleric Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, websites said, amid reports proceedings were violently disrupted by hardliners.

Opposition website Rahesabz.net said "tens of thousands of people" were attending the funeral of Montazeri, an inspiration to Iranian reformists and human rights activists, who died aged 87 on Saturday.

Iran negotiator calls for atomic arms ban

AP, Tokyo

Iran's chief nuclear negotiator for a global nuclear weapons ban on Monday but insisted all nations including his own have a right to develop nuclear energy.

Visiting Tokyo to meet with senior Japanese officials, Saeed Jalili insisted that his country's nuclear program is for civilian purposes, although the US and other nations fear its goal is to produce weapons.

The US and its allies are pressing Tehran to accept a UN-brokered plan under which Iran would ship the majority of its low-enriched uranium out of the country.

That would temporarily leave Iran without enough uranium stockpiles to enrich further to produce a nuclear weapon.



PHOTO: AFP
People walk along a snow-covered street in central Madrid yesterday. Snowfall disrupted road and rail transportation in Spain and forced the cancellation of dozens of flights as a cold spell ravages much of Europe.



PHOTO: AFP
Villagers living in the foothills of the rumbling Mayon volcano ride on a truck after local officials asked them to evacuate the town of Guinobatan in Albay province yesterday. More than 3,000 villagers remaining in a no-go zone around the Philippines' rumbling volcano began to evacuate after officials threatened to force them out.

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