

Climate

Countries deadlocked

Talks dragged beyond deadline, rifts remain

MADRID, Dec 14, (AP): Countries remained deadlocked Saturday in talks over combating climate change as UN talks dragged on beyond the official deadline with no end in sight.

Chile's environment minister, **Carolina Schmidt**, who is chairing the two-week talks in Madrid, urged officials from almost 200 countries to recognize the "overall balance" of the latest draft agreements hammered out overnight.

"We must show the outside world that we deliver," she said, as officials prepared to hunker down for further negotiations.

But observers and environmental groups expressed outrage at the current proposals, saying they risked undoing or stalling on commitments made in the 2015 Paris climate accord.



Schmidt

"I've been attending these climate negotiations since they first started in 1991, but never have I seen the almost total disconnection we've seen here (...) in Madrid between what the science requires and the people of the world demand, and what the climate negotiators are delivering," said Alden Meyer, a climate policy specialist at the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Meyer said the current drafts didn't reflect urgent warnings from scientists that greenhouse gas emissions need to fall sharply, and soon, in order to keep global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) by the end of the century. By most calculations, temperatures have already risen 1 degree Celsius since pre-industrial times and efforts so far put the world on course for a 3-4 degree Celsius rise by 2100, with potentially devastating consequences particularly for vulnerable developing countries. "The planet is on fire and our window of escape is getting harder and harder to reach the longer we fail to act," Meyer said.

Growing concern about climate change has been reflected in mass protests staged around the world over the past year, often by young activists concerned about the future they and their children might face as the planet heats up.

Demonstrations took place inside and outside the venue of the talks in the Spanish capital, with Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg one of the most prominent voices calling for urgent action to curb emissions.

Some countries said it was time to heed those demands.

"We have the science. We have the collective will to deliver enshrined in the Paris agreement. And now it is time to step up," said Ola Elvestuen, Norway's environment minister.

Message

"A weak encouragement will not be understood by the outside world," he said. "It will send a message that we are not listening to science."

Among the countries pushing back against agreeing new measures to help poor countries and set new emissions cutting targets was the United States, which under President Donald Trump announced it is pulling out of the Paris accord.

"I've just heard the comments of many others here today on the need to include an expansive additional language on gaps and needs," said Kimberly Carnahan, a State Department official representing the United States at the talks.

"We don't support such language and we would not think that it would lead to the balance of this text, but rather take us quite far in the other direction," she said.

Small island nations, which fear disappearing beneath the waves over the coming decades as global warming leads to sea level rise, bristled at the US position.

"(Decisions) should be made by countries that are going to be bound by those decisions and not by parties who are not going to be bound by the Paris agreement," said Ian Fry, ambassador for climate change of the Pacific state of Tuvalu.

Harjeet Singh of the humanitarian group Action Aid said the European Union would also shoulder blame if the talks in Madrid fail to make progress. "It does a lot of sweet talking but it doesn't really help people, so it is as good as taking the line of the United States," he said.

Schmidt, the talks' chairwoman, said that the latest drafts attempt to provide "a sensible and workable solution" on rules for international carbon markets, one of the key issues left over from last year's meeting in Katowice, Poland.

Also at stake is a system for channeling money to help poor countries cope with the economic impact of climate change, which is predicted to devastate fisheries and agriculture in some parts of the world.



A woman looks at a World globe at the COP25 climate talks congress in Madrid, Spain on Dec 13. Officials from almost 200 countries are scrambling to reach an agreement at a United Nations climate meeting amid growing concerns that key issues may be postponed for another year. (AP)

Environment

Preservation or development?

Brazil's Amazon at a crossroads

TRAIRAO, Brazil, Dec 14, (AP): Night falls in Brazil's Amazon and two logging trucks without license plates emerge from the jungle. They rumble over dirt roads that lead away from a national forest, carrying trunks of trees hundreds of years old.

After pulling onto a darkened highway, the trucks chug to their turnoff into the woods, where they deliver their ancient cargo. By morning, the trunks are laid out for heaving at the remote sawmill, its corrugated metal roof hardly visible from the highway.

The highway known as BR-163 stretches from soybean fields to a river-side export terminal. The loggers were just south of the road's juncture with BR-230, known as the Trans-Amazon. Together the highways cover more than 5,000 miles, crossing the world's fifth-biggest country in the state of Para.

Carved through jungle during Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1970s, the roads were built to bend nature to man's will in the vast hinterland. Four decades later, there's development taking shape, but also worsening deforestation — and locals harbor concerns that progress may pass them by.

The highways first meet in the city of Rurópolis, where the military government promised land to lure people to the planned agricultural village. One 53-year-old man, Hilquias Soares, remembers a state agent in his hometown yelling, "Who wants to go to Para?"

His family took the chance, arriving just after President Emílio Médici, a general, inaugurated the town. Archival footage shows Médici unveiling a plaque reading: "The Brazilian people

respond to the challenge of history, occupying the heart of the Amazon." Children play on see-saws and show off T-shirts with the crossroads sprawling across the continent-sized nation.

"There was a dream of colonization, of getting land and seeing if here we could have better financial conditions," Dedé Diniz, 69, said in his home. "A lot of people don't recognize what we did, what we fought for."

Diniz examines a photograph he took of Médici and, below it in his album, a shot of a truck trapped in mud. It's nothing like the bucolic painting on his wall that shows farm furrows and wild forest beside the highway, where a machine repairs ruts.

People

He jokes that he'll update the painting with asphalt soon — that stretch should be paved by 2021. Already people have started moving in from other states to buy land for cattle pastures.

Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, a former Army captain, won last year's election with support from farmers, truckers and miners by resurrecting the dictatorship-era desire to develop the world's largest tropical rainforest. But he did so at a different stage of human history, one where scientists recognize the Amazon must remain to suck carbon from the air and help arrest climate change. Some also argue the Amazon, which has lost some 20% of its original forest, is nearing an irreversible tipping point. In that sense, Brazil itself is at a crossroads.

From Rurópolis, the Trans-Amazon and BR-163 run jointly westward over

a bumpy 70 miles before splitting at a little roundabout. During corn and soy harvests, 2,600 trucks pass through each day to and from the nearby Tapajós River.

There, trucks pull into transshipment ports. Grain cascades from their containers to be loaded onto barges. After a downriver trip that takes days, the grain is poured into ships' holds and dispatched across the world, largely to China.

That transoceanic network seems far removed from the road warriors filling up on grilled beef or bowls of açai in truck stops. While the truckers eat, grease-stained mechanics replace worn-out shocks and blown-out tires.

At the start of Bolsonaro's administration, only 32 miles of BR-163 from soy country to the Trans-Amazon remained to be paved. But tropical rains transformed the dirt into impassable mud. Soy trucker Sandro Vieira recalled being stuck in gridlock two years ago, consuming nothing but bread, coffee and peanuts for a week; to this day, the smell of peanuts disgusts him.

Bolsonaro's government last month finished paving the soy corridor. The decades-delayed achievement is the first of major public works to come, Infrastructure Minister Tarcísio de Freitas said. They include a \$3 billion grain railway alongside BR-163.

A ministry promotional video for foreign investors shows deer and other wild animals in their habitats, living in harmony with highways.

"We know Brazil has a responsibility to the world, and we will fulfill our responsibility," de Freitas said.



An Indian motorcyclist rides with children holding umbrellas during rains in Jammu, India on Dec 13. Cold wave conditions intensified across north India after some states received a fresh spell of snowfall leading to sudden dip in temperatures, according to India Meteorological Department. (AP)

Discovery

Boeing crew capsule ready: Boeing's Starliner crew capsule finally has a launch date for its first test flight to the International Space Station.

After an intensive review Thursday, NASA and Boeing managers agreed to a Dec 20 liftoff.

"Hopefully, we should all be getting an early Christmas present this year," said **Phil McAlister**, director of NASA's commercial spaceflight development.

Just a few technical issues remain to be completed, he noted.

No one will be aboard, just a mannequin named Rosie. Three astronauts will strap in for the second test flight of a Starliner sometime next year. (AP)

Black bears off limits: The once-threatened black bear will continue to be off limits to Florida hunters, as part of a 10-year management plan approved Wednesday by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The bears used to number only in the low hundreds and were declared a threatened species in the 1970s. Since then, their numbers have exploded, with the bear population swelling to about 4,000 across the state.

In some places, they have become a nuisance and safety issue as humans and the animals encroach on each other's habitat. (AP)

Syria museum relics recovered:

More than 1,000 ancient relics and mosaics were saved from Islamic State group militants when staff at the museum of the Syrian city of Raqqa managed to hide them underground and in storehouses, Syrian officials and experts said Thursday.

The Syrian Kurdish-led administration in northeastern Syria said the 1,097 pieces — which were part of the original nearly 7,000 relics in the Raqqa museum — have been saved.



McAlister



Abdul-Karim

Maamoun Abdul-Karim, Syria's former director general of Antiquities and Museums, told The Associated Press the 1,097 relics were among 5,800 pieces stashed away safely at the start of the war.

He said "heroic staff of the museum" had worked to hide as much as they could as militants advanced on the city.

Since the city was liberated, the Kurdish-led administration and museum staff have been looking for what remains of the hidden treasures, he said. (AP)

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