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Time Running Out to Avoid a Devastating Climate Crisis, UN Warned

NEW YORK, New York, September 25, 2007 (ENS) - United States President George W. Bush today told the UN General Assembly that he supports a "strong and vibrant" United Nations empowered to carry out the shared goals of the world body and its host country, from addressing global pandemics to stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to dealing with climate change.

"As America works with the United Nations to alleviate immediate human needs, we are also coming together to address long-term challenges," President Bush told the assembly. "Together, we are preparing for pandemics that could cause death and suffering on a global scale. Together, we are working to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. And together, we are confronting the challenges of energy security, environmental quality, and climate change."



President George W. Bush addresses the UN General Assembly today. (Photo by Eric Draper courtesy The WhiteHouse)

President Bush voiced appreciation for "the discussions on climate change led by the secretary-general" last night, when the two attended a dinner that capped a day of events devoted to galvanizing the international community on the issue.

But Bush did not attend the day-long high-level climate talks convened at UN Headquarters by the secretary-general. Instead, he held bi-lateral meetings at the The Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York with President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority and with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Asked about the lack of participation of President Bush, who attended the dinner but not the day's meeting, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon replied that the U.S. leader said an upcoming meeting he has planned bringing together industrialized countries aimed to be supportive. "He made it quite clear that what he is going to do is to help the

United Nations so that the United Nations can work to address this global warming issue."



From left: General Assembly President Srgjan Kerim, President George W. Bush, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. (Photo by Eric Draper courtesy The White House)

Bush will convene the first of a series of climate meetings with the leaders of "major economies" Thursday and Friday in Washington. Fifteen national governments plus the European Union and the United Nations are scheduled to attend. Bush said the conference will place "special emphasis" on technology.

At Monday's high level climate meeting, Secretary-General Ban said, "A new global commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions is urgently needed if the world hopes to avert the most dire affects of human-caused climate change. The message is quite simple," Ban said. "We know enough to act. If we don't act now, the impact of climate change will be devastating."

"All the developed countries and the major emitting countries must commit to the objective of reducing emissions by at least 50 percent between now and 2050," French President Nicolas Sarkozy said. "Collective action is imperative."

But Bush's continued resistance of limits on emissions of greenhouse gases has proved a stumbling block to many attempts to establish this commitment, including at this summer's G8 summit in Germany.

The strongest U.S. voice at Monday's meeting was that of former Vice President Al Gore who called for "a new Marshall Plan" that will "simultaneously tackle global warming and poverty."

"We must link poverty reduction with the sharp reduction of carbon dioxide emissions," Gore said, calling for a plan of attack like that of the Marshall Plan, the post-World War II European reconstruction initiative of the United States, to link the struggles against climate change and poverty.

"We now face a global crisis that makes it

abundantly clear that increased carbon dioxide emissions anywhere are a threat to the integrity of this planet's climate everywhere," Gore told a luncheon event called "Global Voices on Climate Change."

The event, hosted by Denmark, Indonesia, Kenya and Poland, was held on the sidelines of the largest-ever gathering of world leaders on climate change.



Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore
(Photo courtesy UN)

Increased emissions are responsible for rising temperatures and rising sea levels, which combine to elevate both food and water insecurity worldwide, Gore said.

"The old divide between North and South, between developed and developing, is now obsolete," he told the event's participants, who included 40 heads of state or government, nine deputy prime ministers and vice presidents and 70 cabinet ministers from all over the world.

Gore also urged the completion by 2009 of negotiations for creating a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol. The current global framework for reducing greenhouse gas emissions took effect in February 2005 and it will expire in 2012.

The next opportunity to create that successor agreement comes in December in Bali, Indonesia, when all governments that are Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, hold their annual conference.

"We simply cannot wait longer," Gore said, calling on heads of state to convene meetings every three months until a post-Kyoto treaty is agreed upon.

"We cannot continue business as usual," Gore urged. "We cannot continue at a slow pace."

A second strong voice from the United States, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California, told the high-level meeting on climate change that his state is on the "cutting edge of what is to come. And what is coming will benefit the countries and peoples represented in this chamber."

"California is mobilizing



California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (Photo courtesy UN)

technologically, financially and politically to fight global warming change," said the governor, "and we're not doing this alone."

"While California is leading in the U.S.," he said, "we are building on the work of the European countries who have led the way up until now and have done extraordinary work. England has already met its Kyoto goals. Germany has pioneered solar. The EU has led with its trading systems, and the list goes on and on."

Last year California enacted Greenhouse Gas Emission Standards and also enacted the world's first Low Carbon Fuel Standard. But Schwarzenegger said he does not believe that the California standards will solve global warming.

"Of course not," he said. "What we are doing is changing the dynamic, preparing the way, and encouraging the future. The aerospace industry built the modern economy of Southern California. The computer industry and the internet built the economy of the Silicon Valley, and now clean, green technology, along with biotech, will take California to the next level."

"Do not lose hope," Schwarzenegger encouraged the delegates. "I do not believe that doom and gloom and disaster are the only outcomes. Humanity is smart, and nature is amazingly regenerative. I believe that we can renew the climate of this planet. I believe this 100 percent."

Lo Sze Ping, from Greenpeace China, told the attendees that the world's worst per capita emitting countries need to stop using developing countries as an excuse not to act.

Lo called for an "energy revolution" with massive uptake in energy saving and renewable energy technology worldwide, and real action by world leaders rather than more talk.

"At the climate negotiations in December, you must therefore agree to nothing short of a Bali Mandate," he said. "Not a road map to nowhere, not a wish list."

Today at the UN General Assembly debate, many leaders addressed the issue of climate change.

General Assembly President Srgjan Kerim of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia said, "The dramatic effects of climate change have become increasingly visible and violent, with those least responsible for it suffering the most."

He said countries have sent a strong political message that the time for action had come, which was why he had proposed creating a comprehensive road map to guide the way forward for the United Nations.

President Lula of Brazil welcomed the secretary-general's decision to encourage high-level debate on climate change. "If the groundwork on global development is not rebuilt, the risks of unprecedented environmental and human catastrophe will grow," he said.

Highly industrialized countries should set the example by fully complying with commitments under the Kyoto Protocol, Lula said, encouraging the General Assembly to set more ambitious environmental goals beyond 2012, beginning with universal accession to the Protocol.

He said Brazil would soon launch a National Plan to Combat Climate Change and, recognizing the central role of deforestation in climate change, said Brazil has cut the rate of deforestation in the Amazon region in half over the last three years.

"Brazil will under no circumstance abdicate either its sovereignty or its responsibilities in the Amazon," Lula said.



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (Photo courtesy UN)

He proposed a new Conference on Environment and Development to be hosted by Brazil in 2012. The purpose would be to review what had been achieved since 1992 and to set a new course of action. The first UN Conference on Environment and Development, commonly known as the Rio Earth Summit, was held in 1992 and popularized the concept of sustainable development.

"We will not overcome the terrible impacts of climate change until humanity changes its patterns of energy production and consumption," Lula said. He suggested a greater use of biofuels for energy, and said that his country's experience over the past 30 years showed that biofuel production did not affect food security. It was possible to combine biofuels with environmental protection and food

production.

In the future, Brazilian biofuels on the world market would have a seal of assurance for its social, labor, and environmental quality. He said an international conference to lay the foundations for global cooperation on the issue of biofuels has been scheduled for 2008 in Brazil.

Following his meeting Monday with President Bush, the Brazilian leader said that on climate change Bush "has demonstrated the willingness to reach an agreement - in the many different conversations that we have had he has demonstrated very clearly his willingness, and the U.S. is willing to be more flexible. And he's also willing to discuss with all countries on climate change."

President of Chile Michelle Bachelet told the UN General Assembly today that a new global political consensus is needed to deal with climate change, based on a shared but differentiated set of responsibilities and within the framework of the United Nations. "If we do not act now, the future of all humanity will be endangered," she warned.

Bachelet described the impact of climate change on her country, where "the speed with which the glaciers are melting has doubled in the past 10 years." At the same time, Chile's southern zones are experiencing a "dangerous depletion of the ozone layer, jeopardizing the health of our citizens."



Chilean President Michelle Bachelet
(Photo courtesy UN)

She called for stepped-up international action. "There is no time to lose. The effort of consensus that we must make, the effort to enlist the greatest possible support, is comparable only to the effort for peace made on the occasion of the adoption of the San Francisco [UN] Charter six decades ago."

While acknowledging that all countries must contribute to this effort, she emphasized that those who "have already polluted and achieved their development" have special responsibilities.

"We ask the developed countries to promise technical and financial assistance to the developing countries that most need help with their efforts to combat climate change." And, she said, developing countries must undertake "additional emissions reduction actions in the framework of a global effort."

Bachelet voiced hope for the success of negotiations planned for Bali, Indonesia this December aimed at hammering out a successor pact

to the legally binding Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions, which is set to expire in 2012.

Prime Minister of Portugal Jose Socrates, speaking on behalf of the European Union, called climate change "one of the great challenges facing mankind."



Portuguese President Jose Socrates spoke for the European Union. (Photo courtesy UN)

The response to it should be global and collective with enough political will and urgent, determined action to achieve success, he said.

He hoped yesterday's High-Level Event on Climate Change would add momentum to the creation of a comprehensive post-2012 agreement on the climate regime.

In an effort to take the lead on environmental issues, the European Union decided to raise its commitment to cut greenhouse gas emissions from 20 percent to 30 percent, he reminded the General Assembly. He called once again for global greenhouse gas emissions to be reduced by at least 50 percent from 1990 levels by 2050.

President of Ghana John Agyekum Kufuor told the delegates that in Africa, the consequences of climate change have made it difficult for many to guarantee the necessities of life.

Erratic rainfall patterns, drought, desertification, floods, and other weather-related patterns had exacerbated famine, retarded efforts to reduce poverty, and undermined development progress. He urged the international community to accelerate its cooperation in aiding developing countries' efforts to adapt to climate change impact through finance and technology transfer.

President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev described the disaster of the Aral Sea, which had lost three quarters of its water by the 1990s, devastating millions of people living around it and damaging the environment of the Eurasian continent by salt from the exposed sea bed.

As Kazakhstan is a major energy producer, he proposed discussion of a global energy and environment strategy at the 2012 World Summit on Sustainable Development and said he was committed to ensuring global energy balance and security.