

JOCELYN NEWMARCH

Mexico's climate change ambassador spoke out yesterday against attempts to play down expectations for a major UN climate conference in Cancun, as forestry rules came under the spotlight at climate talks held this week in Bonn, Germany and civil society warned of the impacts vulnerable communities are already facing.

Mexico will host the annual UN climate conference in December, and a series of talks held this year are meant to prepare for the conference and work towards an overarching global agreement on climate change.

But climate negotiators have openly said that a comprehensive agreement is unlikely to be reached this year, due to mistrust between countries, and that an agreement may be more likely in 2011, when SA will play host to negotiators in December.

Ambassador Luis Alfonso de Alba told journalists yesterday that many different outcomes are possible from Cancun, and that playing down expectations for that conference would not help the process.

"We are not going to aim at closing a deal, but we are going to try to clear the way so we can move on," he said. "We need to be pragmatic, realistic and ambitious, at the same time."

Mr de Alba said Mexico would attempt to give negotiations on the future of the Kyoto Protocol "a push", but that complementary treaties might be needed. The protocol's first commitment period expires in 2012, and governments need to decide whether to continue with the protocol, which currently the only international climate agreement, although the United States has not signed up.

Civil society observers are up in arms over forestry rules. Plantations and forests, which absorb carbon, reduce the total amount of emissions from developed countries, but exactly how they should be accounted for is currently under debate.

They said governments were attempting to overstate the amount of carbon sequestration available in this sector in order to lower the levels by which they would have to reduce emissions. Eco, civil society's own conference newsletter, reported that developed countries said they would only reach the lower ends of their targets unless they received the accounting loopholes requested - which would see real reductions in emissions of substantially less than the 25% emissions cut by 2025 that has already been pledged.

According to accepted climate science, industrialised countries need to cut emissions by 40% in order to keep global temperatures from rising by more than 2 degrees.

Meanwhile, the Global Water Partnership has called for a greater focus on water security as part of countries' adaptation to climate change, noting that rainfall and water management was becoming more uncertain. Regional cooperation is needed, it said, as many rivers cross national boundaries, including 63 rivers in Africa alone.

GWP's executive secretary Ania Grobicki said there was no single UN organisation devoted to water, and water had been marginalised in the discussions. "These past weeks, we have seen some of the worst floods in eastern Europe for centuries," she said, adding that floods in Bangladesh had come up to six weeks earlier than usual.

Around \$16bn is needed to supply 300m Africans with access to clean water, said Baai Mas Taal, executive secretary for the African Ministers' Council on Water.

Coastal communities around the world are already experiencing severe impacts from climate change, said the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Its senior advisor on climate change for Asia, Ainun Nishat, said in Bangladesh the most vulnerable communities were those living on the coast. These communities are at risk from storm surges and coastal cyclones, whose frequency and intensity is increasing. In addition, coastal areas were become increasingly saline, affecting freshwater ecosystems.

"The people living there no longer feel safe," he said, adding that 200 000 people had been left homeless from the last two cyclones the country had experienced.

By 2015, half of the world's population will be living within 100km of the coast, said IUCN. The organisation says some 500m people, mostly in developing countries, depend on coral reefs for food and income - but a fifth of coral reefs have disappeared already and another 35% are under threat because of climate change.

newmarchj@bdfm.co.za<mailto:newmarchj@bdfm.co.za>