

Rich Polluters Need to Show Better Example -- UN

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Byline: Philip Blenkinsop

BERLIN (Reuters) - Rich nations are setting a bad example to the developing world by failing to cut emissions of heat-trapping gases under a landmark U.N. plan to curb global warming, the United Nations climate change chief said.

"Developing countries have taken the position very firmly up to now that industrial countries should take the lead. They haven't shown leadership and they haven't shown yet that they are meeting their commitments," Joke Waller-Hunter, executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, told Reuters in an interview.

The Kyoto Protocol, a step toward reining in rising world temperatures that many scientists say will cause more storms, droughts and floods and push up sea levels, comes into force on Feb. 16.

The 141-nation pact will force developed countries to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, by 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2008-2012.

Nations including Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Greece, New Zealand and Canada are far above the targets.

"If countries took all the measures, we will get where we should be, but we need to step up our efforts to really meet the challenge," said Waller-Hunter, whose job it is to oversee climate change commitments.

From 2012, Kyoto backers hope to involve developing nations in restraining emissions. Waller-Hunter said developing countries were looking for a sign that richer nations are taking emission limits seriously before they consider caps.

She nevertheless expressed optimism that political leaders were taking scientists' warnings ever more seriously, in part because of increasingly freak weather conditions. Business too was also facing the challenge, she said.

HIGH PRIORITY

"I note how high the climate issue is on the political agenda. We will see it with the G8, hosted by the UK. In Davos, at the World Economic Forum, business set out three priority issues and climate change was one of them," she said.

She added the targets were well within reach with existing technology, such as better energy efficiency and switching from high-polluting fuels like coal toward less polluting natural gas or renewable energies like solar or wind power.

The Kyoto Protocol itself was a strong signal that targets were real, she said, despite the fact that the United States, the world's biggest polluter, and Australia, have pulled out.

Washington says Kyoto is too costly and wrongly excludes developing nations.

Waller-Hunter said it was unrealistic to expect the current U.S. administration to join the pact, but noted encouraging developments such as California's aim to cut car emissions and plans by seven New England states to trade carbon.

Even developing countries had woken up to the problem. China, Brazil and India, among the world's top six polluters, presented inventories on greenhouse gas emissions last year.

Waller-Hunter argued the costs of capping emissions was far from prohibitive -- roughly one percentage point from long-term growth of at least 30 percent that many countries expected -- and said work for the post-2012 period urgently needed to begin.

"The negotiations until now have been difficult and there is no consensus yet on the way forward," she said.