

UN considers climate change push

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The United Nations is considering a "high-level meeting" on climate change in September to give political direction to a crucial gathering of environment ministers in Bali this December, which could lead to a world summit next year.

In an interview with the Financial Times, Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general, said the most "practical and realistic approach" was a high-level meeting – which could comprise ministers and other senior delegates – at this year's UN General Assembly. This meeting "may be able to give some clear guidelines to the December Bali meeting".

Assuming the meeting is successful, "a summit level meeting will have to be discussed later on," said Mr Ban. "It may be 2008 or 2009."

This year there were calls for a summit-level meeting at the UN in September but Mr Ban warned "one difficulty is whether I can see for sure the participation of all the major countries, including the United States".

The less ambitious "high-level" formula would give countries flexibility over what level delegates to send.

UN officials said the secretary-general was likely to present proposals over the coming weeks. Mr Ban said that after attending this June's summit of the Group of Eight leading countries: "I may be in a clearer position to propose a certain initiative."

According to one adviser, a high-level push is needed to save the Bali meeting from a lack of direction, as environmental advocates try to translate near-scientific consensus on man-made global warming into a coherent international policy.

"If we stay on the current course, it does not look like the Bali meeting will ... set the groundwork for negotiations post Kyoto," warned the official,

Time is fast running out to forge a successor to the Kyoto protocol that would come into force without a gap after the current provisions end in 2012.

Yvo de Boer, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, told the FT: "I hope negotiations [on a new agreement] will begin well before 2009, as 2009 is probably when you would have to complete negotiations."

He signalled that the UNFCCC was willing to discuss a new agreement that would be different to the current protocol, under which developed countries would cut their emissions.

"The prospects improve for an agreement the more you allow for flexibility in the discussions. If you say that legally binding targets and caps are the only way to go, that's probably not conducive for enthusing [countries] to enter the debate. It would be good to start with a number of options on the table," he said.

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