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UN: Climate Conference Looking To Russia To Ratify Kyoto Protocol

By Eugen Tomiuc

International environmental specialists attending a United Nations conference on climate change in Germany say greenhouse-gas emissions remain a threat and warn that developed countries, instead of reducing their emissions, could increase the quantity of greenhouse gases over the next several years. UN officials are calling on Russia to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which would allow the landmark document to finally take effect.

Prague, 12 June 2003 (RFE/RL) -- A heat wave in India kills almost 1,500 people as monsoon rains come later than usual.

Tornados wreck dozens of homes in Germany and Romania, where people used to watch such storms only on TV.

The Danube, Europe's second-largest river, is at its lowest levels in many decades, while on some parts of the continent, people are still reeling after being hit by the hottest temperatures ever recorded in late spring.

Some experts say such extreme weather indicates the climate is changing, mostly due to pollution and the increasing quantity of so-called "greenhouse gases" in the atmosphere. Others argue that such weather fluctuations are normal. But all scientists agree that greenhouse-gas emissions are dangerous and must be reduced.

However, experts from more than 150 countries attending a 10-day conference in Bonn are learning from a new report that industrialized nations are likely to increase their emissions by as much as 17 percent until 2010. This despite pledges under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to reduce emissions by more than 5 percent by 2012.

The Bonn conference is organized by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Vitalii Matsarski, one of the officials who supervised the UN report, told RFE/RL: "According to information that was provided to us in the [developed] countries' national communications...on what they do in climate change, it seems that unless some additional measures will be taken, emissions of developed countries might increase up to the year 2010."

Most developed countries have ratified the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which aims to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases below 1990 levels by 2012. Such gases, mainly carbon dioxide, are largely blamed for global warming. But the Kyoto Protocol can only take effect if at least 55 countries, which account in total for at least 55 percent of 1990 levels of carbon-dioxide emissions, ratify the treaty.

So far, some 109 countries have ratified the document, with the notable exceptions of the United States, the world's biggest polluter, and Russia.

The U.S. legally withdrew its signature from the protocol, saying it would harm the country's economy. Therefore, the Bonn conference, which ends tomorrow, has been dominated behind the

scenes by negotiations to convince Russia to ratify, which would push the total percentage of the ratifying countries' carbon-dioxide emissions to about 60 percent, meaning the protocol could finally take effect.

Christoph Bals of the German environmental NGO Germanwatch noted that if Russia were to sign by September, the Kyoto Protocol would take effect in time for a climate summit in Milan in December.

"It would be a totally different summit if Russia would ratify [the Kyoto Protocol] in time, and then the Kyoto Protocol would be already in force before the summit, or whether the Kyoto Protocol is still not yet in force and we still have to wait then on the Russian ratification. So the big issue here for this conference, behind the scenes, is whether Russia will ratify or not," Bals said.

In an interview yesterday with Reuters, Joke Waller-Hunter, the executive secretary of UNFCCC, urged Russia to end the ambiguity and say if and when it plans to ratify the protocol. But the UNFCCC's Vitalii Matsarski told RFE/RL the Russian delegation has given no clear indication about Moscow's intentions.

"Without Russian ratification, the [Kyoto] Protocol cannot enter into force because the United States already declared they will not ratify the protocol. So now, unless Russia ratifies the protocol, it will not enter into force. The Russian delegation here at this session made a statement indicating Russia is seriously considering this issue, that there are several groups looking at the economic consequences of the ratification of the protocol by Russia, and they expect they will come with a sort of a clear answer soon. But, for the moment, there is no announcement about when and how that will happen," Matsarski said.

If the Kyoto Protocol does take effect, it will allow for countries to trade emission quotas set by the UN -- meaning that a country whose emissions are larger than its quota could trade rights with other countries, provided it helps those countries invest in environmental protection measures.

Bals, whose Germanwatch organization has been involved in promoting environmental measures in Central and Eastern Europe, said the protocol could greatly help these countries continue the clean-up of their air.

Bals told RFE/RL that substantial progress has been made in the region toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. "And also in Eastern Europe, we have seen significant reductions in greenhouse-gasses emissions. In the Czech Republic between 1990 and 2000, about 20 percent. In other Eastern European countries between 30 [percent] and 70 percent. Letland [Latvia] is 70 percent. In Russia [it] is 40 percent. In Bulgaria and other countries, it's about 50 percent. But the times when climate protection was just [beginning to] happen because of the restructuring of the economy are now over. Now the time has to begin when real climate-protection measures have to be introduced," Bals said.

The UN's Matsarski agreed that a lot depends on the Kyoto Protocol taking effect. "These schemes of emission trading are still at a planning stage, although in some countries -- in the United Kingdom, for example -- there are already some trades going on. But all that is in anticipation of the entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol. As far as Central and Eastern Europe is concerned, they also expect that with the entry into force of the protocol, eventually they will probably have some excessive emissions that they could sell. But for that, as I said, the first requirement is that the protocol should enter into force," Matsarski said.

The UNFCCC's Waller-Hunter said she remains confident that Russia will ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Waller-Hunter told Reuters that a conference on the climate scheduled for September in Moscow would provide what she called an "excellent opportunity" for Russia to do so.

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