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Poor world 'cuts climate gases'

By Alex Kirby
BBC News Online environment correspondent

Many poor countries are working to cut their emissions of greenhouse gases, a senior United Nations official says.



The computer models predict a warmer Earth

Although they do not yet have to act under the international climate treaty, she says, they are wasting no time.

She says the treaty itself, the Kyoto Protocol, which has not yet become part of international law, is "a peanut - but a vital one in the long run".

And she believes its signatories are committed to making it work whether or not the treaty is eventually ratified.

The official is Ms Joke Waller-Hunter, executive secretary of the UN Climate Change Convention. The countries which have signed the convention are meeting in the Italian city of Milan from 1 to 12 December "to assess progress in addressing climate change".

Staying away

The protocol will enter into force only when 55 signatories have ratified it: they must include industrialised countries responsible for 55% of the developed world's carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions in 1990.

Some critics say President Bush's decision that the US, which emits more greenhouse gases than any other country, will not ratify the protocol condemns it to irrelevance.

But enough other signatories have done so for it to enter into force if and when Russia, another big polluter, ratifies. So far President Putin has not said it will ratify.

“ We shall have to find ways of making the principle of equity a reality, or it will be very hard to get the poorer countries involved ”

Joke Waller-Hunter

Ms Waller-Hunter told BBC News Online at the convention's offices in the German city of Bonn: "There are 119 countries which have ratified the protocol, and I get the impression they are committed to implementing it regardless of it entering into force.

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"In the developing countries, known in the protocol as non-Annex One countries, we're seeing a keen interest in Kyoto.

"Countries like India, China and Cuba are all waiting for the protocol's clean development mechanism to start working - that will let richer countries invest in projects to cut greenhouse gases in the developing world.

"The rapidly industrialising countries see their environmental and economic interests coinciding. China is really decoupling energy use from GDP."

Only a start

The protocol aims to reduce emissions of six gases scientists say are helping to change the climate. If it is implemented, industrialised countries' emissions will by some time between 2008 and 2012 be cut to 5.2% below their 1990 levels.

But many scientists say cuts of around 60-70% will be needed by mid-century to avoid runaway climate change.

Ms Waller-Hunter said: "It's wrong to think the protocol will do so little that it's insignificant.

"It's a very important first step that can lead to much more far-reaching measures. Yes, it's a peanut - but a vital one in the long run."

At the moment only the industrialised (Annex One) countries have to cut their emissions, but within a few years these cuts will be obligatory for every country.

Backsliding begun

Ms Waller-Hunter said: "We have to look at a future of increasing carbon constraints. And we shall have to find ways of making the principle of equity a reality, or it will be very hard to get the poorer countries involved.

"The overall aim of stabilising emissions has been met, but mainly because of cuts by countries in transition, [the former members of the Soviet Union]. The UK and Germany have performed well, but not all their European partners - Spain's emissions have risen by 46%".

The Milan meeting, much of which is highly technical, will also receive a report on emission trends and projections.

Whatever voluntary efforts the poorer countries are making, this shows the combined emissions of Europe, Japan, the US and other highly industrialised countries could grow by 8% between 2000 and 2010.

This would take them to 17% above their 1990 levels, in stark contrast with the rich countries' Kyoto commitment to achieve significant cuts.

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