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Kyoto Pact Clouds U.N. Climate Conference

Monday December 1, 2003 1:16 AM

By FRANCES D'EMILIO

Associated Press Writer

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ROME (AP) - Indications that Russia will reject the Kyoto pact on greenhouse gas reduction has participants at a U.N. conference worried that the global treaty might never get off the ground.

When organizers, scientists and environmentalists began planning for the conference, which begins Monday and runs through Dec. 12 in Milan, many had hoped that Russia would have joined the protocol.

The treaty, negotiated in 1997 in Kyoto, Japan, sets a target of cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 8 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

To date, 119 parties have signed on, but together they account for less than 55 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, the threshold needed for the treaty to go into force.

After President Bush rejected the treaty and its mandatory pollution reductions in 2001 as too harmful to the U.S. economy, Russia's support was needed to meet the 55-percent requirement.

But in October, Russian President Vladimir Putin predicted that the pact would fail to reverse climate change, "even with 100 percent compliance." His economic adviser, Andrei Illarionov, contended the Kyoto Protocol would "doom Russia to poverty, weakness and backwardness."

Under the pact, if a country exceeds its emissions levels, it can be forced to cut back on industrial production.

Since the United States is the world's largest polluter, its refusal to join Kyoto is already "a big drag" on the battle to fight global warming, said Jonathan Pershing, a geologist heading the delegation of the World Resources Institute, a Washington environmental think tank.

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A rejection by Russia will further present a dilemma to those countries which have embraced the treaty, participants said.

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"There's a number of forks in the road," said Pershing. "Those countries who have said 'yes' go forward without a formal international treaty. But how do you do that?"

From the Associated Press

Pershing said back-room discussions at the conference will cover the possibilities, including one option that nations could sign a series of bilateral deals with other Kyoto members.

Up for discussion in Milan are rules under which industrialized nations can earn credits toward satisfying their own emission-reducing requirements by helping developing nations, which aren't required under the protocol to reduce emissions.

Eligible projects range from making factories more energy efficient to helping promote forests, which absorb carbon dioxide, a chief greenhouse gas culprit.

"It doesn't matter where a carbon molecule comes from," in terms of overall greenhouse gas buildup, said Alden Meyer, a conference participant from the Washington-based Union of Concerned Scientists.

Meyer noted that the United States is a successful pioneer in what's known as emissions trading. Under a federal system, U.S. power companies can sell other companies credits they've earned for producing emissions linked to acid rain that are under capped levels.

The U.S. undersecretary for global affairs, Paula Dobriansky, who will attend the conference's final, high-level sessions, said the discussions will help illustrate "how promoting cleaner energy and energy technology is certainly in the interest of developing and developed countries alike."

The United Nations said the Milan conference will also evaluate efforts by governments to tackle the climate change challenge.

"That 2003 is on track to be one of the warmest years on record should be a warning that we must all take seriously," said Joke Waller-Hunter, executive secretary of the U.N. Climate Change Convention.

This spring, the European Union warned that 10 EU countries, including conference host Italy, are "way off track" for agreed targets on cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

A rise in average temperatures has been blamed, at least in part, for melting glaciers and rising water levels, prompting fears that coming decades will witness floods, water shortages and hardships for animals.

Retired Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr., administrator of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said some questions about climate change are yet to be fully understood: the length of a carbon cycle, the way the molecule circulates around the planet and what humans contribute to global warming.

The United States aims to cut emissions by 18 percent over the next 10 years.

“The current administration has a policy to reduce greenhouse gas emission,” said Lautenbacher. “Whether the world accepts that or not is another issue. We are not being irresponsible” by rejecting Kyoto, he contended.

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