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INTERVIEW - World Needs Far Tougher Action on Warming - UN

OSLO - Industrial countries will have to make swingeing cuts in greenhouse gas emissions to slow global warming, perhaps of up to 80 percent by 2050 as suggested by some nations, the UN's top climate official said on Thursday.

Yvo de Boer, who took over as head of the UN Climate Change Secretariat this week, also said the UN-led fight to slow warming should be made more attractive to the United States and developing nations which are outside the Kyoto Protocol.

"I think that much more needs to be done, probably in the range of emission reductions of say 60 to 80 percent by the middle of the century that some industrialised countries have been talking about," he told Reuters in his first interview.

He said the world had made a "good start" to rein in emissions -- produced mainly from burning fossil fuels in factories, power plants and cars -- with a 1992 Climate Convention and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

"But it's not much more than a start," he said.

Kyoto obliges 35 rich nations to cut greenhouse gas emissions by about 5 percent below 1990 levels by 2008-12, via energy savings and a shift to cleaner sources such as wind or solar energy.

He said countries within Kyoto, taken as a whole, were "probably on track to meet their Kyoto commitments" provided they made more efforts at home and made use of Kyoto projects such as investing in clean energy in developing countries.

Many scientists say that Kyoto will have little effect in braking a projected rise in world temperatures this century that could raise world sea levels by almost a metre, spread deserts, diseases and cause more floods and powerful storms.

SMOKESTACKS COLLAPSE

And the collapse of Soviet-era smokestack industries has sharply cut emissions in Kyoto participants such as Russia and Ukraine, outweighing sharply rising emissions in countries including Spain and Canada.

De Boer, from the Netherlands, said the fight against climate change would not work unless more nations were coaxed -- rather than cajoled -- into taking part.

President George W. Bush pulled out of Kyoto in 2001, saying that it would damage the US economy and wrongly excluded developing nations from the 2012 goals. The United States is by far the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases.

De Boer said that many savings could be made in energy use, for instance, by replacing ageing coal-fired power plants. And he said that cost estimates, for instance by one leading sceptic that Kyoto would cost US\$150 billion a year, were short-sighted.

"If you take the example of my own country, you could say it costs a lot to raise the dikes to be prepared for a sea level rise of 50 cm. But if you look at the economic value of the hinterland that the dike is protecting the cost of the dike is rather irrelevant."

In the longer term, he said that developing nations were also "a critical part" of the solution. China and India, the most populous countries on earth, have fast-growing economies.

"I haven't heard of anyone calling for an absolute cap on the emissions of developing countries," he said, adding that they should get incentives to slow the rise of emissions.

Incentives might include, for instance, a new "energy programme financing mechanism, that helps large developing countries to cover the costs of greening their economic growth and their energy consumption," he said.