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UN calls for compromise in climate-change talks

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The United Nations climate chief on Thursday called for rich and developing nations to reach a compromise as they held talks in Japan in their bid to forge a new deal on fighting global warming by the end of next year.

Officials from the United Nations and 21 countries, whose greenhouse gas emissions account for 70% of global emissions, opened two days of closed-door talks in Tokyo to help find common ground.

The informal talks come ahead of negotiations in Bangkok from March 31 to April 4 on reaching a deal to succeed the landmark Kyoto Protocol, whose obligations on slashing gas emissions expire in 2012.

"It will be important to find out what industrialised countries can do, what developing countries are willing to do, and how these two can be able to run together like well-oiled cog wheels," UN climate chief Yvo de Boer said.

"But all of this will only work if developing countries identify their role in global low-carbon development," he told reporters.

The Tokyo talks include the United States, the only major industrial country to reject the Kyoto Protocol, as well as fast-growing polluters China and India.

The meeting opened ahead of a joint declaration expected on Friday by major companies pledging to play their part in fighting global warming.

"Climate change needs an economic solution and the negotiations are an opportunity to find solutions that are economically viable worldwide," said De Boer, head of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The UN chief is expected to meet Japanese business officials later in the day to push for a "cap-and-trade" system, in which companies face limits on greenhouse gas output and have economic incentives to do better.

Japan is the home of the Kyoto Protocol but is far behind in meeting its own commitments. The government has refused to legally bind companies to cap gas emissions, fearing risking an ongoing recovery from recession in the 1990s.

"While nearly all industrialised countries have commitments under the Kyoto Protocol and are working towards a cap-and-trade approach, there is still considerable industry opposition to this in Japan," De Boer said.

According to UN experts, industrial countries need to cut back 25% to 40% of their gas emissions by 2020 from 1990 levels to halt the warming of the planet, which poses catastrophic consequences for both humans and animals.

The Kyoto Protocol, signed in 1997 in the ancient Japanese city, requires major developed nations to slash emissions causing global warming by an average of 5% from 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012.

A UN conference on the Indonesian island of Bali in December called for negotiations on a treaty to succeed Kyoto to wrap up by the end of 2009, when a meeting is due in Copenhagen.

But the Bali conference also exposed divisions, with US President George Bush's administration fighting any clear numerical targets for now on how much to slash emissions in the post-Kyoto framework.

Artur Runge-Metzger, head of the environmental unit of the European Commission, which is also taking part in the Tokyo talks, called for action to break the impasse.

"If you look at the international climate negotiations over the last years, they were stuck and deadlocked," he told a press conference on Tuesday ahead of the meeting.

"The United States has been walking away from the Kyoto Protocol on one side, and on the other side you know that major developing countries are not making any moves forward in order to see how the climate change can be tackled." -- AFP