

International

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US puts climate debate on hold for five weeks despite plea by Merkel

Senate delay means no bill likely before Copenhagen
German leader makes historic Congress address

Suzanne Goldenberg Washington
Damian Carrington

International negotiators lost one of the key elements to a successful deal on global warming yesterday after Democratic leaders in the US Congress ruled out passing a climate change law before 2010. In the latest obstacle on the road to the UN summit in Copenhagen next month, Senate leaders ordered a five-week pause to review the costs of the legislation.

The delay, which would push a Senate vote on a climate change bill into next year, frustrates a last-minute push by the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, and the UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, to get America to commit itself at home to cut emissions before the Copenhagen meeting. World leaders - and US officials - have repeatedly said US legislation is crucial to a deal on global warming.

Merkel used a historic address to a joint session of Congress yesterday to urge America to act on climate change, stating that success at Copenhagen rested on the willingness of all countries to accept binding reductions in carbon emissions.

The first German leader to ever address both houses of Congress, Merkel said a deal was comparable in importance to

7/12 Copenhagen talks begin on 7 December, but there is a widening realisation that chances of a binding deal are slipping away

the tearing down of the Berlin wall 20 years ago. "We need the readiness of all countries to accept internationally binding obligations," she said to loud applause from Democrats. Republicans largely sat in silence. "There is no doubt about it. In December, the world will look to us: the Europeans and the Americans. I am convinced once we ... show ourselves ready to adopt binding agreements we will also be able to persuade China and India."

Merkel also raised her concerns with Barack Obama in a visit to the White House earlier in the day. He told reporters: "Chancellor Merkel has been an extraordinary leader on the issue of climate change. And the US, Germany, and countries around the world are all beginning to recognise why it is so important that we work in common to stem the potential catastrophe that could result if we see global warming continuing unabated."

Ban is also pressing the Senate to act before Copenhagen. Speaking in London, he said he would next week meet all the US senators involved in the deliberations over the energy and climate bill. Agreement on that bill is seen as vital: without it, the US team in Copenhagen will have little domestic mandate to agree a deal.

However, the appeals for urgent action



Angela Merkel and Barack Obama during their White House meeting yesterday Photograph: Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP

were overridden by political concerns in the Senate, which formally began debate on a proposed climate change law last week. The House of Representatives narrowly passed a climate change bill in June. But the Senate version has been repeatedly delayed, first by the battle over healthcare reform and now by Republican demands for more time to study the proposals.

In a move to stem the Republican protest, and quieten Democrat critics, the Democratic leader in the Senate, Harry Reid, said he would ask the Environmental Protection Agency to spend five weeks reviewing the potential costs of the bill. Opponents of the proposal argue the target of a 20% cut in emissions on 2005 levels by 2020 is overly ambitious, and will be too costly for US businesses and families.

The five-week delay would all but rule out passage of a bill before the Copenhagen meeting begins on 7 December.

The president of the European commission, José Manuel Barroso, acknowledged progress before the Copenhagen meeting was likely to be limited: "Of course we are not going to have a full-fledged binding

treaty, Kyoto-type, by Copenhagen," he told reporters yesterday, before meeting Obama. "There is no time for that."

Ban also pressed another key component to a deal: climate finance. He said countries would have to increase the \$100bn (£61bn) a year on offer for developing countries to deal with climate change.

Development groups have estimated the money needed at up to \$400bn a year. But the amount was uncertain, Ban said: "We have to see how measures are effective. As time goes by we may need to change arrangements."

Developing countries are demanding significant new funding at the climate negotiations, which are continuing this week in Barcelona, and deep cuts in rich countries' emissions in exchange for pledges to curb their own emissions. Problems in the talks erupted in public yesterday with African nations boycotting meetings. They want rich nations to promise much bigger cuts in their emissions than they have so far, arguing that African countries will suffer most from global warming, yet are least responsible.

CO₂ from forest destruction overestimated - study

David Adam
Environment correspondent

The carbon dioxide emissions caused by the destruction of tropical forests have been significantly overestimated, according to a new study. The work could undermine attempts to pay poor countries to protect forests as a cost-effective way to tackle global warming.

The loss of forests in countries such as Brazil and Indonesia is widely assumed to account for about 20% of all carbon dioxide produced by human activity - more than the world's transport system. The 20% figure was published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007 and was widely quoted after being highlighted by the Stern review on the economics of the problem. It is repeatedly used by Prince Charles and others as an incentive to push efforts to include forests in carbon trading.

Curbing emissions from deforestation is one of the main issues being discussed at a UN climate meeting in Barcelona this

week, before crucial talks in Copenhagen next month.

But researchers led by Guido van der Werf, an earth scientist at VU University in Amsterdam, say the true figure is closer to 12%. Publishing their analysis in the journal Nature Geoscience, they say the 20% figure was based on inaccurate and out-



Tropical deforestation had been said to account for 20% of human CO₂ output

of-date information. Van der Werf said: "It's a tough message because everybody would like to see forests better protected and it is difficult to tell them that carbon dioxide emissions are less important than assumed."

He added that the lower figure could make it harder to agree ways to reward forest protection with lucrative carbon credits. "If you want to put a price on carbon [in forests] then you would get less carbon for your money now."

The study showed previous assessments exaggerated the rate of tropical deforestation. It also took into account soaring emissions from fossil fuel burning since 2000, which reduces the relative role of deforestation. The scientists say 12% is an estimate, and the figure could be between 6% and 17%, but that the original 20% figure was equally uncertain.

Van der Werf said an important finding of the research was the previously unquantified emissions from tropical peatlands, which they say could be as high as 3% of global CO₂ - more than the aviation industry.

Gore's green investments prompt conflict of interest row

Ed Pilkington New York

The launch of Al Gore's new book this week has prompted questions about whether the former US vice-president's investments in green technology amount to a conflict of interest.

Gore's latest call to action over climate change, Our Choice: a Plan to Solve the Climate Crisis, has prompted a debate about his involvement in firms investing in the new green economy that he promotes.

The New York Times points out that one company in which Gore invested, Silver Spring Networks, has contracts with utilities that last week received a combined subsidy of \$560m (£340m) from the US energy department. The payments, part of a total \$3.4bn handed out by the federal government to encourage the distribu-

Al Gore invested in a company that has contracts with utilities that last week won a \$560m subsidy from the US government



tion of environmentally-friendly power, are likely to be handsomely recouped by Gore and his associates.

The accusation that Gore is trapped in a conflict of interest has been raised periodically over the past few years. It is a barb popular among climate change sceptics and rightwing bloggers, as well as Republican politicians. Gore has responded in the past by saying all the money he made from his investments was put back into his non-profit foundation to spread knowledge about the climate challenge.

One of Gore's partners at Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Byers, a Californian venture capital firm that has put about \$1bn into about 40 companies that will be bidding for contracts under the new system, is John Doerr, who advises Barack Obama on dealing with the economic downturn.

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