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Durban climate deal sealed to save face

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Climate negotiators in Durban salvaged a deal after an extended day of negotiations to keep alive the prospects of a new, legally binding emission cut regime by 2020, including the extension of Kyoto Protocol and making operational the much-needed Green Climate Fund. The negotiators reached the agreement on December 11 after two weeks of tense negotiations.

Even as nations ponder over the Durban text, experts feel that the pledges to cut emissions, by both developed and developing countries are not sufficient for keeping the global average temperature rise below two degrees Celsius, the threshold for dangerous climate change. The same is opined by the International Energy Agency which insists that global emissions will have to be reduced well before 2020. Still, the deal is hailed as positive by many experts, considering the initial lack of progress during talks.

One of the crucial decisions of the Durban conference was the extension of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol — the only existing legally binding emission cut mechanism — for at least another five years. The exact termination date for the next commitment period will be decided at next year's United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiation in Doha. For its part, the European Union will undertake a second round of emissions abatement under the Kyoto Protocol, after its main provisions will expire at the end of 2012. However, Canada's decision not to remain in the extended Kyoto Protocol frustrated the developing world. More worryingly Japan and Russian might also follow suit.

The Kyoto Protocol sets binding targets for 37 industrialised nations including the European Union to slash carbon emissions to five percent below the 1990 levels by 2012. Until now, China and India have been exempted from any constraints because of their developing country status, while the United States has opted out of the Kyoto Protocol.

The biggest success of the Durban negotiations is that all countries have agreed to negotiate a new mitigation regime by 2015 and make it operational by 2020. The burden of emissions reduction will be shared by both developed and developing nations in the new legally binding regime called the 'Durban Platform for Enhanced Action'.

The groundbreaking agreement has been made possible despite a last-ditch resistance from China and India (who fear that their economic growth will be affected as a result of this) and despite the usual lack of enthusiasm from the United States. This agreement is likely to rupture the divisive line between developed and developing countries. This is expected to end the free pass to pollute, given to developing countries under the Kyoto protocol. Some of the developing countries, notably China India, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, are now responsible for 58 percent of global emissions.

Fearing the price to pay, the biggest developing-country polluters, mainly China and India, were reluctant to enter into any legally binding emissions cut regime. The Indians were the last major obstacle to the new mitigation regime. Nevertheless, they too accepted the deal after the inclusion of 'equity' provision for consideration.

It is yet to be clear what the provisions of the post-Kyoto mitigation regime will be. The absence of any punitive clause in the Kyoto Protocol has allowed countries like Canada to overshoot its target with impunity. More countries would be encouraged to exceed their emissions limit if penalties for failure are not in place into the successor of the Kyoto Protocol. Governments at the Durban summit also acknowledged that the current trend of emissions cuts is unlikely to keep the global average temperature rise below two degree Celsius.

Another important achievement of the summit is that an agreement has been reached on the broad design of a Green Climate Fund, which will funnel \$100 billion that developed countries have agreed to make available to poor ones by 2020, to help them for mitigation and adaptation activities. Countries have already started to pledge contributions to cover start-up costs of the fund, meaning that it can be made ready in 2012 allowing developing countries to access the fund sooner rather than later. A standing committee comprising of 20 members is to keep an overview of climate finance. However, there was no agreement and ambiguity remains over the sources of the money for the Green Climate Fund.

During the Durban summit, the Europeans were very active and up-front for the extension of Kyoto Protocol and the post Kyoto mechanism; their efforts were supported by many developing countries, including poor African nations and small island nations most vulnerable to global warming. These countries stood behind the EU's proposals which made it possible to gain something out of the negotiation.

The Durban conference might push a split in the G77+China bloc because of the conflict of interests between big developing countries like China and India on one side and the rest of the developing countries on the other. India might be unhappy with the outcomes at Durban since it fears that any mitigation action will incur costs and affect its economic growth. On the other hand, China, which is the world's biggest polluter, has little to worry about regarding the Durban decisions. In fact, China has long been undertaking stringent emissions-cutting mechanisms and has already invested heavily in renewable energy and energy-efficiency schemes.

The United States has typically been viewed as an obstacle to the UNFCCC process. For most of the negotiation process it played its usual role and tried to block almost everything. Earlier, the world's second biggest polluter did not ratify the Kyoto protocol citing asymmetry in it in terms

of responsibility. But in Durban, the US was left with little choice since the post Kyoto mechanism has provisions of emission cuts for both the developed and developing world.

Bangladesh, that led the Conference of Parties on behalf of the least developed countries won't be too unhappy with the outcome of Durban summit given the global circumstances. The Bangladesh delegation that participated in the deliberations at Durban sought a second commitment of the Kyoto Protocol. It also asked for additional resources from developed nations on an incremental basis, every year from 2013, to reach US\$ 100 billion per year by 2020. The government of Bangladesh should now focus on how it can channel resources from the Green Climate Fund and other funding windows to meet the country's adaptation needs.

Although hopes were running high, there were a number of reasons to be sceptical about the ultimate outcome of the summit, given the volatile global economic situation where most countries are struggling to meet their immediate concerns at home. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the Durban climate conference has at least saved face by reaching an agreement, if not a comprehensive deal. However, the Durban summit is not the end of climate negotiations. Bangladesh should continue pushing hard for the developed world along with other LDCs to remain in the extended Kyoto Protocol as well as ensuring that the pledged funds flow from the industrialised nations to the Green Climate Fund.

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