

CANCUN: Deal restores faith in U.N. process but many questions remain *(Monday, December 13, 2010)*

Jean Chemnick and Lisa Friedman, E&E reporters

CANCUN, Mexico -- Red-eyed and ruffled climate change negotiators stood just after 1 a.m. Saturday in the hotel ballroom that had been converted into a U.N. plenary hall embracing one another and patting colleagues on the back.

After a marathon 24 hours of closed-door bargaining, the exhausted delegates were anxious to have the fruits of their labor adopted. Two preliminary votes had already been won. They knew they were close. Then Bolivia took the floor. There was an audible groan throughout the room and even a few half-hearted boos.

"It is totally inadequate," said Bolivian Ambassador Pablo Solon regarding the ability of the "Cancun Agreement" to rein in catastrophic consequences of global warming. Rejecting the text unequivocally, he said, "Bolivia does not support this objective."

But unlike last year's U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) summit in Copenhagen, Denmark, when Bolivia and a handful of others brought decisionmaking to a standstill, this year the president of the talks said "consensus does not mean unanimity" and gavelled through the agreements over Bolivia's objection.

The result, said ministers and analysts alike, was a set of agreements that restored widespread confidence in the U.N. climate talks. UNFCCC Chief Christiana Figueres declared her bureaucracy "back on track." Indian Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh declared, "Multilateralism lives to fight another day."

And E.U. Climate Commissioner Connie Hedegaard emerged saying, "We have proven that multilateralism can produce results."

But beneath the cheers, experts say serious questions still remain about whether 194 countries can truly mitigate greenhouse gas emissions or whether another more nimble forum is needed.

"I think that there's justifiable skepticism in the U.S. about using the U.N. as the negotiating point for emissions reduction commitments," said Paul Bledsoe, a senior adviser at the Washington-based Bipartisan Policy Center.

"It's largely unworkable to get 194 countries to come to a consensus on those issues," he said. "I

don't believe it's possible."

Bledsoe said Cancun did "provide a measure of redemption and new momentum for the U.N. process" but said a smaller forum like the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate -- which brings together the world's largest carbon emitters and sometimes a few others -- would reach an agreement on emissions more quickly and effectively.

"Once the outline of a deal is reached among the biggest emitters, it could be a basis for a U.N. deal," he added.

Protecting 'most vulnerable' nations

Much of what happened in Cancun this year is viewed through the lens of Copenhagen, which was widely seen as a fiasco after Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba and Sudan blocked the adoption of the Copenhagen Accord. That agreement, brokered by the United States, assigned mitigation responsibilities for the first time to major developing countries like India and China.

In the months to follow, critics asked if the U.N. process is "broken" and whether climate talks need a new forum -- one in which five countries cannot upend the decision of 189.

Michael Levi, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who closely follows the climate talks, said it is "partly true" that the agreement in Cancun vindicated the U.N. system as a vehicle for slowing global warming. But, he said, the outcome still shows that the UNFCCC is not the only forum for climate talks.

"The process worked because it was well-managed and it focused on a set of things where the U.N. is fairly well-suited," like establishing the basic characteristics for a review process, or ironing out how to reflect each country's emission pledge, Levi said.

But, he noted, the United Nations wisely stayed away this time from the things it simply is not good at, like pushing countries to raise the ambition level of their emission targets or deciding how to raise money for vulnerable countries.

But environmentalists and representatives for small countries say these more ambitious issues of emissions-reduction and finance are best addressed in a global forum, where developing nations are present to apply pressure. Processes like the Major Economies Forum, or MEF, should be secondary to the U.N. process, they say.

"It is good for major economies to come together. They share similar challenges, and talk about how they can solve these issues," said Jennifer Morgan, climate and energy program director at the World Resources Institute.

"But at the end of the day, this is the only forum where every country in the world has a voice. And the poorest countries in the world have a voice here, the most vulnerable countries in the world

have a voice here. It's the only legitimate forum," she said.

Without input from nations that are most threatened by climate change, she said, major emitters are likely to agree among themselves on a less meaningful and laxer target.

"There's the risk of the lowest common denominator," she said.

Indeed, a number of experts said it was not the multilateral system that broke down in Copenhagen, but actions by the United States, Denmark and other countries which shut out -- either inadvertently or intentionally -- nations that felt they had a right to be heard.

Obama administration leaders have consistently noted that the Copenhagen Accord was negotiated by about 30 leaders representing all of the main U.N. groups and parts of the world. But developing nations are quick to point out that the United States and European nations hand-picked the representatives who would be in the closed-door meetings. That in particular rankled nations wedded to the U.N. system of selecting a country themselves to represent their block when smaller negotiations are called.

Ned Helme, president of the Center for Clean Air Policy, said the Mexican government shifted hard in the opposite direction, and it worked. Negotiators did meet in small groups but, he noted, the Mexican presidency set up a "green room" of sorts in which any nation could make its views heard at any time.

With the exception of Bolivia, that system was particularly helpful in staving off a late-night fight with the leftist Latin American countries known as the ALBA nations that blocked last year's Copenhagen Accord.

"Somebody said to me that the ALBA countries got more air time than they deserve," Helme said. But, he said, that is what the negotiations needed this year. "Everyone's been bashing the U.N. system. Mexico's shown how you do it. This reassures people this is a place where you can get stuff done."

'Everything was open'

M. Komi Tomyeba, a negotiator for Togo, said the Mexicans had indeed improved the tone of the negotiations simply by ensuring that countries felt heard.

"When we as a developing country looked at this document -- issues around finance, how funding will be raised and distributed ... the organizers in the country very openly took care of every question," he said.

"Everything was open," he added. "There was not any frustration, so people were free to be themselves and to say what there was to say."

Had Cancun ended the way Copenhagen did, said John Ashe, ambassador to the United Nations

for Antigua and Barbuda, the process might have been in trouble.

"It is important that we be seen to be doing something on something as important as this," Ashe said. "It is hard to know whether or not if we failed here the process would come crashing down. It would certainly put some strains on the system, I can see that much."

Still, he said the U.N. process is the most appropriate forum for an agreement on global warming, because it is a global organization.

"Given the nature of the agreement, where it affects every country, and it's a problem that requires a commitment of some sort from every nation, it would be nice if they had a voice in the ultimate determination," Ashe said. "Perhaps that is why this has worked in the past. Now is it the perfect vehicle? We don't know. Until something else comes along, it will have to do."

Want to read more stories like this?

Click here to start a free trial to E&E -- the best way to track policy and markets.

ABOUT GREENWIRE

Greenwire is written and produced by the staff of E&E Publishing, LLC. The one-stop source for those who need to stay on top of all of today's major energy and environmental action with an average of more than 20 stories a day, Greenwire covers the complete spectrum, from electricity industry restructuring to Clean Air Act litigation to public lands management. Greenwire publishes daily at 1 p.m.



E&E Publishing, LLC
122 C St., Ste. 722, NW, Wash., D.C. 20001.
Phone: 202-628-6500. Fax: 202-737-5299.
www.eenews.net