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Headline: Negotiators fast-track climate deal

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LE BOURGET, France—Negotiators scrambled to deal with flash points on Wednesday as France strove to deliver a streamlined draft of a climate deal ahead of a Friday deadline.

The 195-nation UN talks have been billed as the last chance to avert the worst consequences of global warming: deadly drought, floods and storms, and rising seas that will engulf islands and densely populated coastlines.

To seal an elusive deal by Friday's deadline, ministers were racing to resolve a handful of stubborn disputes that have blocked the path to a universal climate pact for more than 20 years.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, presiding over the conference, said he would deliver a streamlined draft for the deal on Wednesday, after receiving feedback from splinter groups haggling over the tough issues.

"It will be an important step, I hope, but not yet the final result," he said.

Nations remained divided over how to help developing countries cope with the costs of global warming, what limit to set for planetary overheating, how to share the burden between rich and poor nations and how to review progress in slashing greenhouse gases.

"Though we have some tough issues in the next few days to resolve, I am confident that we have the ability to do it," US Secretary of State John Kerry said on the sidelines of the conference at Le Bourget on the northern outskirts of Paris.

"They are finally doing the dirty work of negotiating, which is very hard," said Jennifer Morgan, climate analyst at the Washington-based World Resources Institute, an observer at the talks.

"You are finally starting to see the really hard bargaining and arguing that has to happen. It is a good thing, because otherwise they would still be standing by their positions," she said.

New sense of confidence

Observers said a new sense of confidence was emerging in Paris, a hopeful sign six years after the spectacular collapse of the last attempt to reach a global deal in Copenhagen, fractured by distrust between rich and poor countries.

"I believe we can find a comprehensive, ambitious, legally binding agreement with no person left behind. I'm fully confident," China's top climate negotiator Xie Zhenhua said.

India's environment minister Prakash Javadekar said he was disappointed by a "low level of ambition" among rich nations, but predicted the world was "roughly 80 hours away" from a deal.

Taking effect in 2020, the Paris agreement would seek to limit emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases driven by burning coal, oil and gas the backbone of the world's energy supply today.

The goal is to limit global warming to under 2 degrees Celsius over pre-Industrial Revolution levels.

Negotiations are making headway on every front, said France's top negotiator Laurence Tubiana.

One of the biggest potential deal-busters is money.

Rich countries promised in 2009 to muster \$100 billion a year from 2020 to help developing nations make the costly shift to clean energy, and to cope with the impact of global warming.

But how the pledged funds will be raised remains unclear and developing countries are pushing for a promise that the amount will be ramped in the future.

'Fault lines remain'

Meanwhile, rich nations are insisting that developing giants work harder to tackle their greenhouse gases, noting that much of the world's emissions come from their fast-growing economies.

Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan cautioned that "fault lines remain" over how to share greenhouse gas cuts between rich and developing nations.

Small island states at risk of being swamped by higher seas are pushing for a lower warming ceiling of 1.5 C.

"We are the face of vulnerability," said the Philippines' climate delegate and leader of the bloc of vulnerable nations Emmanuel de Guzman.

Nevertheless, De Guzman said, countries most at risk could accept a deal with 2 C as the formal goal, as long as it makes a reference to the lower 1.5-degree threshold.

"I hope the parties will accelerate the speed of their negotiation so that by Friday evening we will have a universal and robust climate change agreement," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said in Paris.

Warning of the price of inaction, Kerry said the United States spent \$126 billion last year undoing the damage of eight huge storms.

The top US diplomat described the splintered wood he had seen strewn across central Philippines in the path of Supertyphoon "Yolanda" (international name: Haiyan) that struck in November 2013, leaving more than 7,350 people dead or missing.

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"That's the future, folks, unless we tame this monster that we have unleashed," he said. AFP