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LE BOURGET, France—A day after world leaders vowed to unite in a war on climate change, negotiators at the United Nations talks got down to the nitty-gritty on Tuesday to try and produce a pact many described as the last chance to avert climate calamity.

US President Barack Obama was to meet with leaders of low-lying island nations to highlight his commitment to help the most climate-vulnerable. But lofty promises have come crashing down to Earth in more than two decades of negotiations.

Obama, China's Xi Jinping and many other leaders vowed their nations would strive to limit heat-trapping "greenhouse" gases that stoke global warming.

The result would be a post-2020 pact that would save Earth's climate system for generations to come, they promised.

More than 180 countries have pledged to cut or curb their emissions, but scientific analyses show that much bigger reductions would be needed to limit man-made warming of the Earth to 2 degrees Celsius (3.8 degrees Fahrenheit) over preindustrial times, the internationally agreed-upon goal.

Biggest issue

The biggest issue at the summit is who should bear most of the burden of closing that gap: wealthy Western nations that have polluted the most historically, or developing countries like China and India that are now the biggest and third-biggest emitters of greenhouse gases?

"Addressing climate change should not deny the legitimate needs of developing countries to reduce poverty and improve living standards," Xi told the conference.

The last major climate agreement, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, required only rich countries to cut emissions, and the US never signed on.

Since then, global temperatures and sea levels have continued to rise, and the Earth has seen an extraordinary run of extreme weather, including severe droughts and storms.

This new round of talks seeks to produce an agreement that would require all countries, rich and poor, to take action.

While the specifics have yet to be worked out, the pact is meant to chart a path toward reduced reliance on coal, oil and gas, and expanded use of renewable energy, such as wind and solar power.

The negotiations will focus on whether emissions targets should be binding or voluntary and how to verify that countries are hitting their targets.

Another big issue will be how to provide the finance and technology that developing countries will need to reduce their emissions and cope with the effects of rising seas, intensifying heat waves and floods.

'Future in your hands'

"The future of the people of the world, the future of our planet, is in your hands," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon told negotiators. "We cannot afford indecision, half measures or merely gradual approaches. Our goal must be a transformation."

China and India say they want the agreement to clearly reflect that industrialized nations bear the biggest responsibility for the problem.

Obama offered assurances that the United States isn't trying to shirk its duty.

"I've come here personally, as the leader of the world's largest economy and the second-largest emitter, to say that the United States of America not only recognizes our role in creating this problem, we embrace our responsibility to do something about it," Obama told the conference.

China catching up

Statistics since 1959 from the US Department of Energy show the United States has been by far the biggest emitter of carbon dioxide, the top man-made greenhouse gas.

It has released about 258 trillion tons of carbon dioxide over the past half-century, compared with China's 158 trillion tons, the figures show.

China is catching up, though, and is now the world's biggest greenhouse-gas polluter, accounting for 28 percent of the world's current emissions—twice as much as the United States.

Beijing has pledged to put a ceiling on its emissions around 2030 as part of the latest negotiations.

"Never have the stakes of an international meeting been so high, because it concerns the future of the planet, the future of life," French President François Hollande said.

"The hope of all of humanity rests on all of your shoulders."

\$100 billion a year

Points of contention include agreeing on a systematic review of emissions-curbing pledges and ramping up climate funding for poor countries so that it reaches a promised \$100 billion a year by 2020, and the legal status of the accord itself.

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Poorer countries are also pushing hard for rich nations to transfer clean technology to help them avoid taking the path of carbon pollution. Reports from AFP and AP