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South Africa sees binding climate change policy in 3 years

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By Agnieszka Flak

MIDRAND, South Africa (Reuters) - South Africa expects to put in place a binding climate change policy within three years to cap emissions by 2020-25, the environment minister said at the launch of a climate summit on Tuesday.

Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Marthinus van Schalkwyk said lack of action could lead emissions in South Africa, the continent's largest emitter, to quadruple by 2050.

"If we continue to grow without a carbon constraint, we face the threat of border tax adjustments or trade sanctions from key trading partners and the destruction of thousands of jobs in the high emitting trade exposed sectors," he said.

He said the government was finalizing a regulatory, fiscal and legislative framework that would make tracking and reporting of emissions mandatory. There would also be penalties if companies did not comply with emission reduction targets.

About half of total emissions come from state-owned utility Eskom, which provides 95 percent of the country's electricity, out of which about 90 percent stem from coal.

The other big culprit is petrochemicals group Sasol, whose Secunda coal-to-liquids (CTL) plant is the biggest single emitter of CO2 on the planet according to environmentalists.

South Africa has often been commended for being most active among developing countries in fighting climate change, but environmentalists say while the government has set ambitious targets, it has been slow in executing them.

Ferrial Adam, a researcher for think-tank Earthlife, said both Sasol, which is building a new 80,000 barrels-per-day CTL plant, and Eskom, which invests in restarting mothballed coal-fired stations to ease a chronic power shortage, were only making things worse.

She also dismissed Sasol's application to the United Nations to produce and sell carbon credits, which could earn the company an estimated 1.1 billion rand (\$106.1 million) annually.

"It allows people to continue polluting; the government has to put pressure and hold these companies accountable," she said.

President Kgalema Motlanthe said it was the poor who would bear the brunt of climate change impact and stressed, along with unions, that the climate challenge was also about combating poverty, sustainable development and energy supply.

South Africa plans to generate some 15 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2020. Abundant in sunlight and wind, renewables are an effective and cheaper alternative for the country, industry players say.

But the lack of investor-friendly policies and subsidies and the need to boost power generation after the national grid nearly collapsed last year have made progress slow, they say.

The climate change summit runs until March 6.

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