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South Africa doubts full-scale international climate deal

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By Agnieszka Flak

MIDRAND, South Africa (Reuters) - A full-scale deal on emission curbs may not be reached in Copenhagen, and South Africa should focus on setting and implementing its own climate agenda first, officials told a climate summit on Thursday.

Government and think-tank representatives said diverging interests, not just between developed and developing countries but also within the groups, would make an agreement difficult.

Nearly 200 nations will meet at the end of the year to try to seal a broader agreement to replace Kyoto and bind big developing nations and the United States to emissions curbs.

"We don't need to wait for the international community to come to some kind of agreement for us to take action," said Deputy Foreign Affairs Director General Sandea de Wet.

Government, unions, industry and environmental groups met at the four-day summit to help shape South Africa's climate change policy framework, to be finalized within a year or two.

"It is prudent to adjust our sails given our own energy needs to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly developmental path without compromising our immediate requirements for poverty alleviation and development," she said.

South Africa, the largest emitter on the continent and 12th in the world, depends on coal for 90 percent of its electricity.

Moves to diversify the energy mix have stalled due to a lack of policy framework and incentives for investors, which the government now hopes to change.

DEAL IN DOUBT

De Wet said she was doubtful the Copenhagen meeting would lead to any fruitful results, given that some countries, especially the United States, might not have had enough time to define their national policies and their emission targets.

"If we can get away with an amendment to Kyoto, that would be the best that would happen, but I don't think the EU would agree to that without firm commitments from the U.S.," she said.

All delegates questioned the U.S. stand, saying that while the Obama administration has been sending initial signals that it wants to take the climate threat seriously, no significant commitments have been made since then.

"There are just too many uncertainties and if the U.S. does not commit to higher reductions soon, it will make the negotiations harder and lead to a delay," said Director for Global Climate Solutions at the WWF, Fuqiang Yang.

The new deal is at risk of failure because poorer nations will not commit to emissions curbs unless rich countries do their fair share to rein in carbon pollution and pay for adaptation and the transfer of clean-energy technology.

Funding would be central to the discussions, de Wet said.

"Developing countries participation and coping levels (will) be directly proportional to the level of financial and technical assistance provided," she said.

South Africa wants a legally binding agreement, with absolute emission targets against a fixed base year for the developed world, while reductions for developing countries should be relative to their emission trajectories.

South Africa, often commended for being most active among developing countries in fighting climate change, set a target to cap emissions by 2020-25, and to reduce them by mid-century.

"South Africa is sending a strong signal to the developing world and others will follow with their own targets," Yang said, adding that a cap to emissions would be possible even for China, which he estimates could happen by 2030.

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