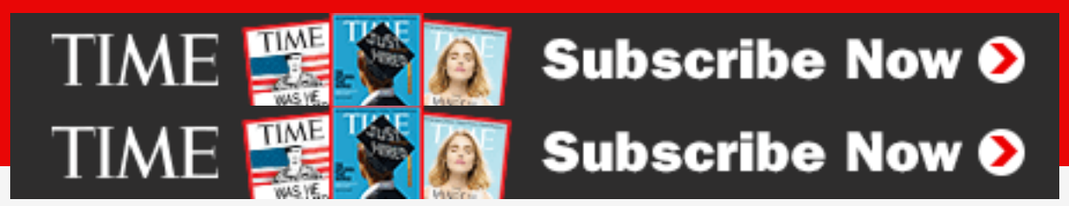

COP15: Climate-Change Conference

TIME looks at the agenda for the talks in Copenhagen that began on Dec. 7, 2009

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CAPPING CARBON

In Copenhagen, a Last-Minute Deal That Satisfies Few

By Bryan Walsh / Copenhagen | Friday, Dec. 18, 2009

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Susan Walsh / AP

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and President Obama talk during a meeting at the United Nations Climate Change Conference at the Bella Centre in Copenhagen on Friday, Dec. 18, 2009

The United Nations climate talks that seemed headed for sure disaster were saved from utter collapse late Friday night in Copenhagen, after leaders from the U.S., India, Brazil, South Africa and China came to an agreement to combat global warming. The deal contained no specifics on emissions cuts, but it did commit the countries to look to keep global warming at 2°C or less and to promise $30 billion in funding to battle climate change by 2012. It also created a framework for international transparency on climate actions for developed and developing nations alike. The agreement is far from perfect — and a long way from what environmentalists were hoping from the Copenhagen summit just a few months ago — but it is a start. "For the first time, all major economies have come together to accept their responsibility to combat climate change," said President Obama, visibly tired after a long day of emergency negotiations in Copenhagen. "This is a consensus that will serve as the foundation for global action against climate change for years to come."

(See the top 10 green ideas of 2009.)

But while the five countries that reached the agreement may be satisfied, the deal was far from finalized. Most African nations and small island states did not initially confirm that they would agree to its outlines. But after delegates in Copenhagen worked through the night, a motion was passed Saturday morning recognizing the U.S.-backed agreement. U.N. Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon told journalists, "Finally, we sealed the deal." He went on to say that this was an "essential beginning" but noted that the agreement must be made legally binding next year. To be accepted as an official U.N. agreement, the deal needs to be endorsed by all 193 nations at the talks.

Environmental groups are split, with mainstream groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council welcoming the news Friday as a first step, with more liberal organizations like Greenpeace denouncing it. Indeed, almost immediately there was harsh condemnation. In a hastily called press conference on the steps of the media center, Lumumba Stanislaus Di-Aping, Sudan's U.N. Ambassador and the head of the G-77 negotiating bloc of developing countries, lambasted the agreement and vowed to fight it. "The deal remains just an idea," he said. "Obama acting the way he did definitely established that there's no difference between him and the Bush tradition."

(See pictures of the effects of global warming.)

Obama seemed to anticipate this mixed reception in his remarks after the agreement was struck by the five countries. He emphasized that even though new analyses have shown that existing carbon pledges by developed and developing nations are far too weak to head off severe warming, this deal is only meant to be the beginning. "The actions that we are going to set, we know that they will not by themselves be sufficient to get to where we need to get by 2050," Obama said. "That's why this is going to be a first step."

As part of the accord, developed and developing countries would list their national actions and mechanisms for addressing climate change, then provide information on those actions, and how well they're carried out, through "national communications, with provisions for international consultations and analysis under clearly defined guidelines," according to an Administration official. That last point was particularly important for the U.S.: the

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Chinese were resistant to coming under international scrutiny, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had earlier called transparency a "deal breaker." Though the details of exactly how the monitoring will be carried out remain unclear — like much in the agreement — it apparently fit Obama's requirements. "Transparency, mitigation and finance form the basis of the common approach the U.S. and other partners have embraced here in Copenhagen," he said before boarding Air Force One to return to Washington.

When Obama arrived in Copenhagen on Friday morning, ministers and some heads of state had been up much of the night attempting to craft a workable agreement without success. Obama's day was spent being shuttled from meeting to meeting with major developed and developing economies. He was stood up at one meeting by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao; by some reports he had to finesse his way into a key meeting with Chinese, Indian and Brazilian officials, where the agreement was finally struck. The deal, "if not what we expected, may be a way of salvaging something and pave the way to another meeting or series of meetings to get the full result of this proceeding," said Sergio Serra, Brazil's chief climate negotiator. In fact, the accord drops the expected goal of setting a deadline to achieve a true international treaty by the end of 2010; the details of such a treaty will most likely require months or years of further negotiation.

Obama was quick to note that the deal was not legally binding for anyone — neither the U.S. nor developing nations like China. Each country will list its climate actions in an appendix to the document; then there will be international analysis and reporting similar to what happens under the World Trade Organization. But there will be no legal penalties if countries fail to achieve their targets. "We'll receive a sense of what each country is doing," said Obama. That way the signatories will know "we are in this together, and we will know who is emitting and who is not."

For some, there was a sense of relief and excitement that, after two weeks of stalled talks and a day of frustration and cancelled meetings, at least something was achieved. Fans of the deal focused on its potential to kick-start clean-energy investment. It may also speed the adoption of cap-and-trade legislation by the U.S. Senate, which is seen as key to establishing a more ambitious global treaty. But for activists and many delegates in Copenhagen, the deal fell far short of what science demands to combat global warming. Many countries are already irritated that they were left out of the last-minute negotiations. "This is a declaration that small and poor countries don't matter, that international civil society doesn't matter, and that serious limits on carbon don't matter," said Bill McKibben, the head of the environmental activist group 350.org. "The President has wrecked the U.N., and he's wrecked the possibility of a tough plan to control global warming."

Even by passing a final plenary vote, the deal will still need to be voted on by the wider U.N. — and with the way the troubled negotiations have gone so far, that's no sure thing. In the end, the compromise was pure Obama: pragmatic, with a little bit for everyone to like and dislike. "This progress did not come easy, and we know that this progress alone is not enough," he said. "One of the things I've felt very strongly over the years is that the hard stuff inspires not paralysis but going ahead and making the best of the situation you are in and then continuing to try to make progress." After two hard weeks, some will argue, it's better than nothing.

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As Time Runs Out, Obama Tries to Save a Climate Deal

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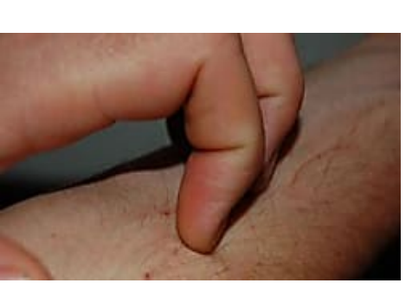

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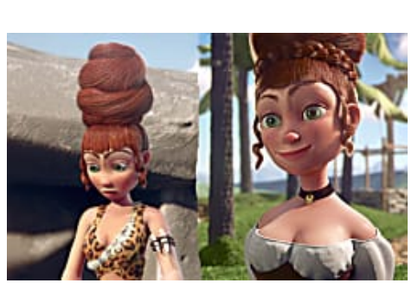

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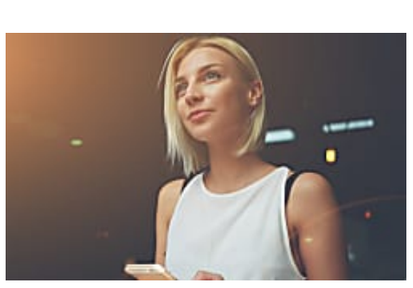

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