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Maldives attacks world community over Copenhagen climate failure

At World Future Energy Summit in Abu Dhabi, three heads of state criticise global lack of ambition on climate change accord.

Vesela Todorova

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International politicians speaking at the opening event of the World Future Energy Summit in Abu Dhabi today criticised the world community for the lack of ambition they said had led to the dramatic failure of the climate talks in Copenhagen. COP15, the UN Climate Change Conference in December, was expected to result in a new treaty to follow the Kyoto Protocol, which was adopted in Japan by 184 countries in 1997 and expires in 2012. Instead, the Copenhagen negotiations, between December 7 and 18, produced only a political agreement to limit global warming to a rise of no more than two degrees centigrade above average temperatures before the beginning of the industrial era in the 18th century.

The conference failed to specify the mechanisms for achieving this and did not set targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases. Today in Abu Dhabi, the heads of state of Greece and the Maldives and the prime minister of Malaysia criticised the international community's lack of resolve. "The Copenhagen Accord in its current form will not prevent catastrophic climate change," said Mohamed Nasheed, president of the Republic of the Maldives, speaking at the opening plenary session of the summit.

"If we do not act now, our coral reefs and tropical forest will die. Deserts will become unbearable to live in and low-lying countries such as the Maldives will disappear under the sea." The Maldives, a chain of 26 low-lying atolls in the Indian ocean, is among the nations most in danger from the consequences of rising sea levels. It has said the target for global warming should be set not at two degrees, but only 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial temperatures. "We do not have the luxury of time to meet year after year in climate negotiations," Mr Nasheed said. "We cannot cut a deal with Mother Nature." Karolos Papoulias, the president of Greece, agreed, adding: "The failure of Copenhagen becomes dramatic if seen as part of a greater picture."

Najib Tun Razak, the prime minister of Malaysia, urged world leaders to do better to ensure a healthy planet. At Copenhagen, the international community had failed to seize the opportunity and rise to the occasion, he said. He warned that a "business-as-usual" scenario would lead to a 44 per cent increase in greenhouse gas emissions between 2006 and 2030, with the strongest growth coming from developing countries. "Addressing the voracious global appetite [for fossil fuels] seems daunting," he said. "It is the challenge of our times."

Mr Nasheed urged that concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere be kept at 350 parts per million, lower than levels now in the atmosphere. Achieving what the Maldives is asking for would mean emissions peaking by 2015 and decreasing thereafter. "By the end of the century, the entire world needs to be climate-neutral," he said. However, that position is not supported by the majority of countries, some of which, such as China last year, question the need for any emissions targets at all. The future of climate-change talks will be the subject of discussions at the summit tomorrow morning when, after a keynote speech by Rashid Ahmed bin Fahad, the UAE's Minister of Environment and Water, experts gather for a plenary forum with the title "What now, after Copenhagen?". Among them will be Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the foremost global scientific body engaging with the issues. They will also be joined by Bianca Jagger, the former model, founder of the Bianca Jagger Foundation and chairman of the World Future Council, an environmental policy organisation.

On Wednesday Lord Stern, chairman of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment and author of the first detailed report to analyse climate change in terms of economic impact, will chair a debate on "International policy and climate change action plans". The political delegates yesterday stressed the importance of energy efficiency and renewable energy. "Energy efficiency is clearly the lowest-hanging fruit," Mr Najib said, urging governments to make it "a culture and a way of life".

Malaysia, which currently relies primarily on fossil fuels, was looking at adopting a "feed-in" tariff to promote the fast adoption of renewable energy, he said. Mr Papoulias said that adopting renewable energy solutions, which were often decentralised and not dominated by large corporations, could help in "dealing with inequalities and providing social cohesion". It could also help to make energy systems "more democratic in developing countries" and bridge the gap between rich and poor countries. "Energy," he said, "will no longer be a means of domination and power." Despite the disappointments of Copenhagen, Mr Nasheed said he remained optimistic: "I believe in mankind's capacity to innovate and change." To his mind, "the smart money is green money" and he praised Abu Dhabi for the stance it was taking on energy issues.

"I am here because in many ways Abu Dhabi represents the future," Mr Nasheed said. The emirate was "investing the proceeds of yesterday's resources to build the green economy of tomorrow". Sultan al Jaber, the chief executive of Masdar, made clear that Abu Dhabi saw a bright future for renewables: "Over the past year, we have all faced the challenges of the economic downturn," he said. "Nevertheless, renewable energy retains its relevance and continues to make sense. The world faced significant climate, he said, and "We cannot afford to falter. We cannot lose sight of our responsibility to drive progress towards a low-carbon economy."

This would require "greater collaboration between the public and private sectors". The latter had to come up with innovations, while governments had to make renewables economically sound. "It is our responsibility and duty to shape our energy future," he said
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