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Much needed progress achieved, as climate summit closed

Rich Heffern | Dec. 13, 2010 Eco Catholic

Defying expectations, the 16th annual UN Climate Conference (COP16) held in Cancun, Mexico, concluded in the early hours of Dec. 11 to the sound of sustained applause. The Conference ended with the adoption of a balanced package of decisions that set all governments more firmly on the path towards a low-emissions future and support enhanced action on climate change in the developing world.

The package, dubbed the "Cancún Agreements," was welcomed to repeated loud and prolonged applause and acclaim by parties in the final plenary.

"Cancún has done its job. The beacon of hope has been reignited and faith in the multilateral climate change process to deliver results has been restored," said UNFCCC Executive Secretary Christiana Figueres. "Nations have shown they can work together under a common roof, to reach consensus on a common cause. They have shown that consensus in a transparent and inclusive process can create opportunity for all," she said.

"Governments have given a clear signal that they are headed towards a low-emissions future together, they have agreed to be accountable to each other for the actions they take to get there, and they have set it out in a way which encourages countries to be more ambitious over time," she said.

Nations launched a set of initiatives and institutions to protect the poor and the vulnerable from climate change and to deploy the money and technology that developing countries need to plan and build their own sustainable futures. And they agreed to launch concrete action to preserve forests in developing nations, which will increase going forward.

They also agreed that countries need to work to stay below a two degree temperature rise and they set a clear timetable for review, to ensure that global action is adequate to meet the emerging reality of climate change.

"This is not the end, but it is a new beginning. It is not what is ultimately required but it is the essential foundation on which to build greater, collective ambition," said Ms. Figueres.

"Countries have demonstrated the ability of the UNFCCC to deliver under pressure," said Sierra Club director Michael Brune, "while creating positive momentum moving forward. The agreement did not close the gap between the commitments countries have made to slow climate change and what is necessary to stave off dangerous levels of warming; that task is left for the next round of talks in South Africa."

Elements of the Cancún Agreements include:

? Industrialised country targets are officially recognised under the multilateral process and these countries are to develop low-carbon development plans and strategies and assess how best to meet them, including through

market mechanisms, and to report their inventories annually.

? Developing country actions to reduce emissions are officially recognised under the multilateral process. A registry is to be set up to record and match developing country mitigation actions to finance and technology support from by industrialised countries. Developing countries are to publish progress reports every two years.

? Parties meeting under the Kyoto Protocol agree to continue negotiations with the aim of completing their work and ensuring there is no gap between the first and second commitment periods of the treaty.

? The Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanisms has been strengthened to drive more major investments and technology into environmentally sound and sustainable emission reduction projects in the developing world.

? Parties launched a set of initiatives and institutions to protect the vulnerable from climate change and to deploy the money and technology that developing countries need to plan and build their own sustainable futures.

? A total of $30 billion in fast start finance from industrialised countries to support climate action in the developing world up to 2012 and the intention to raise $100 billion in long-term funds by 2020 is included in the decisions.

? In the field of climate finance, a process to design a Green Climate Fund under the Conference of the Parties, with a board with equal representation from developed and developing countries, is established.

? A new "Cancún Adaptation Framework" is established to allow better planning and implementation of adaptation projects in developing countries through increased financial and technical support, including a clear process for continuing work on loss and damage.

? Governments agree to boost action to curb emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries with technological and financial support.

? Parties have established a technology mechanism with a Technology Executive Committee and Climate Technology Centre and Network to increase technology cooperation to support action on adaptation and mitigation.These are considered to be significant developments, a real step forward for the UNFCCC process. There has been much speculation over the future relevance of UN climate talks; the outcome provides a shot in the arm to international climate efforts specifically, and multilateralism in general.

There has been broad support for the overall outcome. This has come from both developed and developing countries. The United States, China, the European Union, and India all expressed their strong support. Only Bolivia, Cuba, Venezuela and Saudi Arabia stated their opposition.

For a while, the situation as the conference neared its end resembled the final hours of last year's climate summit in Copenhagen. Then, a small contingent of countries blocked agreement on the Copenhagen Accord. But in sharp contrast to COP15, the mood seemed very different in Cancun with the vast majority of countries applauding the numerous calls for agreement. Strong chairing from the Mexican Foreign Minister, Patricia Espinosa, ultimately prevailed over Bolivian opposition. Espinosa was rewarded with several standing ovations throughout the night in recognition of her diplomatic skills in guiding the conference to a successful conclusion.

The conference's outcome paves the way for rebuilding trust in the UNFCCC process and delivering real progress on international climate action. A global deal in South Africa next year no longer looks quite like the long shot it did a month or so ago.

Securing a commitment by developed countries to a second Kyoto commitment period after 2012 was a key objective of developing countries going into Cancun. This was not achieved. Instead, countries agreed to extend the Protocol negotiations into 2011. This in theory keeps it alive, and keeps Japan and Russia, who firmly stated their opposition to any further Protocol commitments, engaged in the process. It was a critical outcome to ensure that the overall negotiations did not collapse. It remains, however, a flashpoint for negotiations in 2011 and will clearly require resolution at some point.

Changhua Wu, Greater China Director of the Climate Group said: "The Cancun decision will positively reinforce the domestically set ambition in China to shift its economic growth towards a greener and lower carbon future. China's efforts in exploring a new development path through its 11th Five-Year Plan, which focuses on energy efficiency and alternative energy development, set a good example for others to follow. Low carbon growth is now broadly recognized as an opportunity rather than a burden globally. Such a shared vision will give Chinese government and businesses the needed confidence to continue their leading efforts in the upcoming 12th Five-Year Plan."

"This deal could be a turning point for international cooperation on climate change," said Amy Davidsen, US director of the Climate Group. "Countries showed a willingness to look beyond their established differences, and agree to much needed progress on technology, finance, adaptation, and forests. This will help lay the foundation for meaningful action on these actions going forward. The key now will be follow-through on the part of all countries. But today's agreement has sent a signal that a clean industrial revolution is underway."

One of the key agreements from the Cancun climate summit is a deal to pay poor countries to stop chopping down their rainforests. The agreement, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD), was completed over the last weekend. It is still unclear where the funds will come from, but some countries like Norway and Australia are already putting money into Indonesia to stop the destruction of rainforests.

Greenpeace spokesman Steve Campbell says if deforestation was halted by 2020 it could save around two billion tons of CO2 and help limit warming to less than two degrees. "Currently, deforestation globally accounts for about 20 per cent of global CO2 emissions, which is greater than the entire transport sector around the world," he said. "So if you add up all of the cars and buses and air planes and trains and ships, all of their emissions still don't add up to the amount of CO2 that's being produced from deforestation. It's an enormous problem and it's one that really has to be fixed through the international climate negotiations."

European climate commissioner Connie Hedegaard says stopping illegal logging and the legal clearing of forests for cattle farms and palm oil plantations was seen at the Cancun climate talks as a quick fix to tackle global warming.
"As always at these talks it took a while. It took many hours, many efforts. But we succeeded in the end getting a substantial deal done," she said.

Many environmental groups were not satisfied with the conference results. Researchers from the Climate Action Tracker said the pledges made at Cancun would set the world on course to warm by 3.2 degrees Celsius, which could spell disaster for many of the world?s poorest countries on the front lines of climate disruption.

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