

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

EU agrees on ambitious plan to battle global warming

The Associated Press

Friday, March 9, 2007

BRUSSELS, Belgium: Seizing the initiative on global warming, European Union leaders agreed to fight climate change with more windmills, solar panels and efficient light bulbs, pledging that a fifth of the bloc's energy will come from green power by 2020.

Even if the measures force changes in lifestyle, business and the economy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel challenged the rest of the world to follow suit, saying there still was time to "avoid what could well be a human calamity" caused by an overheated planet.

The 27 EU nations remained divided Friday, however, over the role of nuclear energy — a technology that creates little CO2 but a lot of radioactive waste instead.

At French insistence, the summit agreement noted the role atomic energy could play in replacing coal- or oil-fired power plants blamed for pumping out greenhouse gases.

European leaders said the agreement, the first to go beyond the 35-nation Kyoto Protocol in its targets for greenhouse gas emissions cuts, marked a turning point in the fight against global warming.

"We assume leadership with this unilateral reduction," said French President Jacques Chirac, adding, "This is part of the great moments of European history."

British Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed: "It gives Europe a clear leadership position on this crucial issue facing the world."

The EU said it could go even further than its biggest promise of all: Cutting greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20 percent from 1990 levels. The EU said it could go to 30 percent if other countries join.

Climate change leapfrogged onto the EU's political agenda following a record mild winter and the success of Al Gore's documentary "An Inconvenient Truth."

With Friday's commitments — even though there is not yet an enforcement mechanism — the EU now wants to lure other leading polluters, such as the United States, Russia, China and India, to agree on deep emissions cuts as well.

Merkel, who holds both the presidency of the EU and the Group of Eight industrialized nations, will present the plans to U.S. President George W. Bush and other G-8 leaders at a summit in June.



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Even though EU nations still have to decide how to divvy up the burdens of switching to more renewable energy sources, leaders were already claiming victory.

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso called the deal "the most ambitious package ever agreed by any institution on energy security and climate change."

If EU nations fail to carry their weight, the EU's executive arm should be able to launch legal action at the bloc's high court that could lead to the imposition of heavy fines on countries that violate the targets.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon applauded the deal.

"The EU's moves can help put the world's energy systems on more sustainable footing. They offer business strong incentives to develop the advanced technologies that the world, and above all, the developing world needs to meet its energy needs while at the same time addressing climate change," Ban's spokeswoman Marie Okabe said in a statement from New York.

One independent expert said the renewable energy plan contained "a doable target" and called the overall agreement a policy landmark, showing that major polluting countries are taking action to resolve the problem.

The greenhouse gas plan is "an aggressive target but it's one that we would need to meet if we were going to be successful in averting further climate change," said John M. Byrne, director of the University of Delaware's Center for Energy and Environmental Policy.

The plan will also encourage the U.S. and other countries to join the EU goals. Byrne said that "if the EU hits targets like 30 (percent) they will become so much more competitive in a global economy that is becoming more environmentally sustainable compared to the U.S."

Environmental groups sounded a glum warning. Friends of the Earth called the mention of nuclear energy in the final statement "appalling."

"Nuclear energy is too expensive. Nations should invest more cleverly in developing other energy sources," said Jan Kowalzig, a campaigner with Friends of the Earth.

The Greens in the European Parliament insisted more needed to be done. "All credible scientific analysis shows that 30 percent is the reduction needed to avoid disastrous climate change," Spokeswoman Ulrike Lunacek said.

The Kyoto accord requires industrial nations to cut their global-warming gases by an average 5 percent below 1990 levels by 2012. Major EU economies have committed to cut greenhouse gases by 8 percent in that time, and want the United States to sign the treaty. But the Bush administration has rejected the Kyoto agreement, saying it would hurt the U.S. economy.

The EU deal was a compromise between nations that had demanded mandatory targets on clean energy, and eastern European nations led by Poland and Slovakia that had said they do not have the money to meet such high targets for developing costly alternatives. Those nations said they prefer to stay with cheaper but more polluting options such as coal and oil.

At the "green summit," many of the leaders were still ferried around in gas-guzzling fleets of big, black sedans.

Blair looked like an exception, pointedly strolling out of the courtyard of the EU summit center under the glare of TV cameras on Thursday night — only to be followed up the ramp by his official motorcade.

If the summit was high on statistics, light bulbs offered a reprieve. The leaders agreed to ask the EU's executive arm to work out a plan to promote energy-saving light bulbs, following the example of

Australia, Chile and other countries phasing out incandescent lamps.

"We are not saying they should throw out all bulbs in their house today, but everybody should start thinking about what's in the shops," said Merkel.

"Most of the bulbs in my flat are energy-saving bulbs," she said — but acknowledged that "they're not quite bright enough so sometimes when I'm looking for something that's dropped on the carpet I have a bit of a problem."

Associated Press writers Paul Ames, Jan Sliva and Aoife White contributed to this report.

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