

Analysis: On climate, the elephant that's ignored

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A man walks next to Greenpeace activists who form the word hope as a question with their bodies, next to a giant life saver, during a demonstration near the site of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Cancun, Mexico, Friday, Nov. 10, 2010. (AP Photo/Israel Leal)

(AP) -- The latest international deal on climate, reached early Saturday after hard days of bargaining, was described by exhausted delegates as a "step forward" in grappling with global warming. If they step too far, however, they're going to bump into an elephant in the room.

That would be the U.S. Republican Party, and nobody at the Cancun meetings wanted to talk about the impending Republican takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives. It essentially rules out any new, legally binding pact requiring the U.S. and other major emitters of global warming gases to reduce their emissions.

In endless hours of speeches at the annual U.N. [climate conference](#), the U.S. political situation was hardly mentioned, despite its crucial role in how the world will confront what the Cancun final documents called "one of the greatest challenges of our time."

Not everyone held his tongue. Seas rising from warming, and threatening their homes, got Pacific islanders talking.

Marcus Stephen, president of Nauru, spoke despairingly of "governments deadlocked because of ideological divisions." Enele Sopoaga, Tuvalu's deputy prime minister, referred to the "backward politics" of one unnamed developed nation.

A U.S. friend, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, told a large gathering here, "The key thing for us is not whether the American Congress is controlled by this or that party," but that richer nations help the developing world with financial support - for [clean energy](#) sources, new seawalls, new water systems and other projects to try to stem and cope with [climate change](#) and the droughts, floods, disease and extreme weather it portends.

"Which party" does matter, however. Many Republicans dismiss scientific evidence of human-caused warming, citing arguments by skeptics that the large majority of scientists are wrong or that the consequences of warming are overstated.

Early in the two-week conference here, four Republican members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton demanding a freeze on about \$3 billion in planned U.S. [climate](#) aid in 2010-2011.

The senators said some findings of the U.N.'s climate change panel "were found to be exaggerated or simply not true" and said that at a time

of record U.S. budget deficits, "no American taxpayer dollars should be committed to a global climate fund based on information that is not accurate."

The leader of the protest, Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, called the financing an "international climate change bailout." What will they call the long-term finance plan embraced at the Cancun conference, for \$100 billion a year in U.S. and other international climate financing by 2020?

Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, who with Zenawi co-chaired a U.N. panel on climate financing, was asked how this U.S. opposition can be overcome.

"I believe that many things might happen in American politics in a period of 10 years," he replied.

Such long, wishful views have dominated the climate talks for two decades, as the U.S. remained outside the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and the modest mandatory reductions in emissions that other industrial nations accepted.

For the world to agree on a new, all-encompassing treaty with deeper cuts to succeed Kyoto, whose targets expire in 2012, the U.S. Congress must pass legislation to cap U.S. industrial emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

"I don't think that's going to happen right away," Todd Stern, chief U.S. negotiator, said with understatement here early Saturday.

Instead, the Cancun talks, waiting for another day, focused on small steps on climate: some advances in establishing a system to compensate developing nations for protecting their forests, for example, and in setting up a global clearinghouse for "green" technology for developing

nations.

Cancun's chief accomplishment was to decide to create, with details to come, a Green Climate Fund that will handle those expected tens of billions of dollars in climate support.

This slowly-slowly approach began at the climate summit in Copenhagen, Denmark, last year, when the U.S., China, other big emitters and some small one pledged to carry out voluntary reductions in emissions.

Some say this will be the way global warming will be addressed, not with "topdown," legally binding treaties, but with self-assigned targets, bilateral deals to help create low-carbon economies, aspirational goals set by G-20 summits. If the world busies itself with such voluntary activities, this thinking goes, it may all add up to climate protection.

But scientists do numbers better than politicians. And the latest U.N. scientific calculation shows that the current emissions-reduction pledges, even if all are fulfilled, will barely get the world halfway to keeping temperatures rising to dangerous levels. The U.S. pledge - based on executive, not congressional action - is for a mere 3 percent reduction of emissions below 1990 levels.

If too little is done, the U.N. science network foresees temperatures rising by up to 6.4 degrees Celsius (11.5 degrees F) by 2100. In a timely reminder of what's at stake, NASA reported last week that the January-November 2010 period was the warmest globally in the 131-year record.

At that rate, climate will become the elephant no one can ignore.

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