

Climate: US call for 'flexibility' on warming spurs row

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The US climate change envoy Todd Stern, pictured in 2011, said recently that climate negotiations had to avoid a rigid format that prompted nations to defend their own interests and avoid painful curbs.

The United States ran into crossfire on Wednesday after it called for "flexibility" in climate talks, even if this approach could not guarantee meeting the UN's target on global warming.

Europe demanded that the two-degree-Celsius (3.6-degree-Fahrenheit) objective set at the Copenhagen summit in 2009 be honoured while small [island states](#) accused Washington of dangerous backsliding.

The skirmishes came ahead of a new talks for a [global treaty](#) to roll back greenhouse-gas emissions which stoke atmospheric warming and damage Earth's fragile [climate system](#).

In a barely-noticed speech in New Hampshire on August 2, chief US negotiator Todd Stern said negotiations had to avoid a rigid format that prompted nations to defend their own interests and avoid painful curbs.

He called for a "flexible" approach which would not only be easier to negotiate but also encourage deeper cuts in the long run.

"This kind of flexible, evolving legal agreement cannot guarantee that we meet a two-degree goal," Stern acknowledged. "But insisting on a structure that WOULD guarantee such a goal will only lead to deadlock."

Stern's speech met with a hostile response from two major parties in the climate parlay.

"World leaders pledged in Copenhagen to stay below the 2C (3.6 F) temperature increase. What leaders promised must now be delivered," European Commission climate spokesman Isaac Valero Ladron said.

"Consolidated science continues to remind us of the dire consequences of going beyond such a [temperature increase](#)... Time is of the essence here."

Marlene Moses, chair of the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS), said Stern's speech "follows a well-established pattern of the United States lowering ambition at the [climate talks](#)."

"But it is particularly disturbing, coming as it does in the midst of one of the worst [droughts](#) in the country's history," Moses told AFP.

"If the US is prepared to abandon its own farmers, how are we supposed to believe it will do what is necessary to save small islands from sea-level rise and other devastating impacts?"

AOSIS, gathering low-lying nations in the Pacific, Indian Ocean and Caribbean, is campaigning for warming to be limited to just 1.5 C (2.7 F), a goal that could only be achieved with far tougher emissions caps than most states currently accept.

Earth's atmosphere has already warmed by at least 0.8 C (1.44 F) since the Industrial Revolution, reducing ice and snow cover, accelerating glacier melt and affecting reproduction and migration in many species, scientists say.

At present, Earth is on track for warming of 3-4 C (5.4-7.2 F) by century's end, they say.

Campaigners on poverty alleviation accused President Barack Obama of retreating on a [target](#) that he himself had set in Copenhagen, where the figure was reached in chaotic scenes by a small number of world leaders.

"Now, immediately before an election, he is walking away from his own weak policies. This backflip with a twist would win a gold medal at the hypocrisy Olympics," said Christian Aid's climate specialist, Mohamed Adow.

Addressing such criticism, the State Department quoted Stern as saying the [United States](#) "continues to support" the 2C goal.

"We have not changed our policy," Stern said in this clarification. "My point in the speech was that insisting on an approach that would purport to guarantee such a goal -- essentially by dividing up carbon rights to the atmosphere -- will only lead to stalemate."

The next round of talks under the UN Framework Convention on [Climate](#) Change (UNFCCC) run in Bangkok from August 30 to September 5.

They are the last scheduled negotiations under the 195-party UNFCCC ahead of its major year-end gathering, taking place in Doha, Qatar, from November 26-December 7.

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