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U.S. Will Be Active Partner in Upcoming Climate Change Talks

(Adaptation to global warming, better energy technologies under discussion) (780)

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Washington - The United States will be "very active" in the talks on climate change beginning October 23 in New Delhi, but will play a "low key role" in discussions relating to the Kyoto Protocol and its implementation, according to Harlan Watson, senior U.S. climate negotiator and a leading member of the U.S. State Department delegation to the talks.

The meeting is the Eighth Conference of the Parties (COP-8) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Kyoto Protocol is a treaty that grew from the years of negotiation in that framework. It would impose mandatory reductions in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions that are linked to global warming. The Bush administration opposes the Kyoto Protocol on the grounds that its reductions targets would cause serious damage to the U.S. economy.

"We'll be following protocol issues," Watson said at a news briefing in Washington before his departure for India. "We're certainly not going to interfere, but we will be watching very carefully, obviously to protect our national interests."

Watson said the New Delhi meeting will also be the first opportunity for U.S. experts to explain the Bush administration policy on climate change, announced by the president last February. That plan commits the United States to cutting greenhouse gas intensity by 18 percent over the next 10 years. The initiative also supports an enhanced research effort and expands funding devoted to climate change.

The president's budget for 2003 proposes increasing funding for climate change initiatives to \$4,600 million. In addition to outright government spending, the administration plan creates tax incentives to encourage the private sector to adopt more environmentally-friendly energy technologies

A White House fact sheet issued with the initial announcement said, "The president's growth-based approach will accelerate the development of new technologies and encourage partnerships on climate change issues with the developing world."

At COP-8, Watson foresees that the United States will be playing an active role in discussions on the transfer of improved energy technologies to the developing world, and on the need for better science to improve climate modeling and increase environmental observation in order to better gauge the degree of climate change.

Negotiators from the more than 180 parties to the UNFCCC have in recent years focused their discussions on how to mitigate climate change, and the Kyoto Protocol with its emissions reduction targets has been the outcome of that process. Now, however, how to adapt to climate change is on the agenda, Watson said.

Recent droughts in India and the United States and floods in Europe are cited as reminders of what global warming could do, according to UNFCCC press materials, pushing adaptation discussions onto the COP-8 agenda.

"The New Delhi conference will discuss how to build greater capacity, especially in developing countries, for minimizing vulnerabilities and preparing for worsening droughts, floods, storms, health emergencies and other expected impacts," according to a UNFCCC October 16 press release.

Watson said plans on how to adapt to global warming will be very country or region-specific by necessity. Low-lying island nations and coastal areas face the greatest risk of serious impacts in the near term, and Watson said those governments might consider the construction of sea walls, preservation of freshwater supplies or other strategies to contend with the rising ocean levels that are expected to occur as the planet warms and glaciers melt.

Drought or excessive rain are other possible consequences of climate change, and Watson said the focus on adaptation will allow countries to begin looking 20 years into the future to anticipate what may happen and how they might prepare.

"If you're anticipating drought conditions, what are the long-term implications of that, for example," Watson explained. "Do you need more water storage capability ... development of seeds that are more drought resistant?" Looking at adaptation will also underscore the need to improve the science of climate change to better anticipate what problems nations must be ready to solve.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is working with the government of India to address energy and climate change issues, and Watson said the U.S. delegation will also highlight those efforts during COP-8. The program involves a number of projects addressing rural energy development, access to energy, and the use of renewable, nonpolluting sources such as solar and wind.

Finding the proper balance between economic growth and greenhouse gas emission level reductions is another challenging issue that will be on the table in New Delhi, Watson said.

"We don't want to waste resources," Watson told reporters. "How do we reach the most cost-effective approach in dealing with climate change using the best of our knowledge in science and using the best technologies?"

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