

Event Summary: Post-Durban Update

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On January 24th, 2012, the CSIS Energy and National Security Program hosted Jonathan Pershing, Deputy Special Envoy for Climate Change, U.S. Department of State who provided an update on the latest round of climate negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Durban, South Africa, and offered some thoughts on next steps, procedures, and what to look for in future negotiations. Mr. Pershing began his presentation with a brief history of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, followed by a description of events that have taken place at the most recent meetings in Copenhagen and Cancun, and concluded with specific agreements that were reached in Durban.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and Copenhagen

The first United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations were in 1999, and have been held sporadically over the last 20 years, with the most recent meetings held at Durban in December 2011. The Copenhagen Accord, which took place in 2009 and preceded both the Cancun Agreements and the Durban Platform, set a “global goal to hold the increase in temperature below 2 degrees Celsius,” soliciting commitments from both developed and developing countries for mitigation goals based on specified targets (for developed nations) and actions (for developing nations). The Accord also addressed such issues as deforestation, financing, and adaptation and technology development. In total 116 countries took part in the Accord, setting mitigations goals for 2020. The mitigation actions proposed at Copenhagen were significant and substantial, but objections from a number of developing countries, based on a perception that the proposed mitigation expectations were unrealistic and unfair, caused what Mr. Pershing referred to as “a complete breakdown” in Cancun. Since the Copenhagen agreements weren’t codified they were not legally binding; thus, a central focus of Durban and Cancun was how to reach a consensus that could lead to the codification of Copenhagen.

Cancun

After the breakdown of negotiations at Copenhagen, the 2010 Cancun Agreements focused on finding solutions to the problems that were significant barriers for a number of Nations, including maintaining a degree of parallelism between developed and developing nations, reaching more implementable agreements, adaptation and mitigation goals that address current issues and future goals, increased transparency, technology development and adaptation, and increased finance.

In the end a debate between India and the European Union, where India insisted on equity (a common “developing country” perspective), and the EU, who wanted an aggressive framework for next steps in climate change negotiations, opened the floor for improved, bilateral negotiations in Durban. In this debate a few critical issues were discussed that had wide-ranging implications for the development of the Durban Platform; these included the Kyoto Protocol/legal form, a roadmap that comprises the operationalization of Cancun and Copenhagen decisions, and the Green Fund. The result was the framing of an argument that is sure to continue to be important and that will affect the next UNFCCC meeting as well as successive climate change policies.

Durban

The Durban Platform launched “a process to develop protocol, another legal instrument, or agreed outcome with legal force under convention,” in short; to codify Copenhagen and create a legal framework that holds signers responsible for their actions. Negotiations on the resulting future agreements are to conclude in 2015, coming to affect in 2020. New Agreements will be applicable to all parties, but the content of how to reach these agreements are not yet prescribed. As a result, very open, short negotiations are about to start. There will also be an effort to begin working on a greater focus on transparency, building confidence that countries are implementing mitigation efforts, opening up dialogue on reduced emissions and deforestation, and addressing social and environmental safeguards. The Durban Platform resulted in the following recommendations, committees, and established goals:

1. The newly established Adoption Committee, made up of 16 members under the Copenhagen Agreement, will coordinate different bodies to work together, address technology development and adaptation, agree on guidelines, and address loss and damages issues.
2. New technical recommendations will be made. The Climate Technology Center and Network (CTC&N) will prepare project proposals, enhance the capacity to handle tech cycles, identify available technology, and facilitate finance for these technologies. However, no language on intellectual property was introduced or addressed.
3. Durban also brought about an agreement to design a new UNFCCC-administered market mechanism—a work program that will make recommendations based on the acknowledgement that different rates of development still require environmental integrity standards. The agreements reached regarding markets also addressed the need for a framework to discuss the development of these environmental standard programs in different areas of the world.
4. Sectorial approaches to climate change were also considered, with agriculture issues gaining attention and a continued discussion on aviation/maritime issues.
5. A standing committee with long-term finance goals was created, representing a new expert body that will report and evaluate climate finance flows, make recommendations on effectiveness and efficiency of the financial mechanism, and evaluate the entire finance process in a timely manner. The Green Climate Fund was one result of this standing committee proposal, and will consist of a board of 24 (12 developed nations and 12 developing nations). Its structure will be agreed upon by board members, and the World Bank will act as interim trustee with a new, competitive process implemented after 3 years. It is intended that the Green Fund will maintain autonomy and that independence will be granted with guidelines in place to reach the most ideal outcome.

Clear progress was made in Durban. The lead up to next year’s agenda, which will be held in Qatar in December, will require preparatory meetings and agreements on the terms that countries will abide by in future legal documents. All parties have agreed to create a legally binding framework that will be completed by 2015. Moreover, the implementation of programs and national actions are expected to have more oversight from not only the UNFCCC but also participating nations. Finally, there are agreements on finance, technology, transparency and adaptation issues—but there is no room for complacency.