

Rich nations give up on climate treaty

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The governments of the world's richest countries, including the US, Japan and the nations of Europe, are all opting to put off a climate agreement and the United Nations appears to accept this.

GOVERNMENTS of the world's richest countries have given up on forging a new treaty on climate change to take effect this decade.

Ahead of critical talks starting in Durban, South Africa, next week, most of the world's leading economies now privately admit no new global climate agreement will be reached before 2016. Even if an agreement were reached, it would not come into force until 2020.

The eight-year delay is the worst contemplated by governments during 20 years of negotiations, and comes despite intensifying warnings from scientists and economists about the dangers of delaying action.

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After the Copenhagen climate talks in 2009 ended amid scenes of chaos, governments pledged to try to sign a new treaty in 2012, which marks the expiry of the current provisions of the Kyoto Protocol, the only legally binding international agreement to limit emissions.

Britain, the European Union, Japan and the United States are all opting to put off an agreement and the United Nations also appears to accept this.

In Australia, Climate Change Minister Greg Combet has conceded there would not be a major breakthrough at Durban and said Australia would not support a deal that was not "environmentally effective".

Australia and Norway have made a joint submission to the UN calling for a timetable for a strong deal by 2015.

Postponing an operational agreement until 2020 would be fatal to hopes of avoiding catastrophic climate change, scientists and economists say. Developing countries - particularly island states most at risk - are furious and the delay will be fiercely debated in Durban.

Fatih Birol, chief economist at the International Energy Agency, said: "If we do not have an international agreement whose effect is put in place by 2017, then the door to [preventing a global mean temperature rise of 2 degrees] will be closed forever."

Britain's Lord Stern, author of a landmark review of the economics of climate change, said aiming for a 2020 deadline was "pessimistic and risks introducing lethargy" to the process.

"It's not fast enough - this is a collective failure, and [leaving agreement to] 2020 is taking considerable risks with the planet." But he said he was hopeful that countries and companies would continue to try to cut carbon in the absence of a deal in the short term.

Since the failure to reach an agreement in Copenhagen, efforts have focused on the steps being taken by individual countries.

Analysts say the most surprising shift in the past year has been China's commitment to test emissions trading in six regions, with a goal of a national scheme by 2019.

In Australia, Climate Institute deputy chief executive Erwin Jackson said nobody expected a new treaty before 2015.

"It would be foolish to think countries are not acting," he said. "You don't have renewable energy investment outstripping fossil fuel investments at a global level by accident."

Opposition spokesman Greg Hunt said the government should revisit its carbon tax modelling.

"The assumption of a global scheme among all of the major trading economies has now evaporated."

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