

ANALYSIS

Japan cast as villain at U.N. climate talks

By DAISUKE YAMAMOTO
Kyodo News

CANCUN, Mexico Related stories: Pages 6, 9 — Japan found itself in unfamiliar territory at the just-concluded U.N. climate change conference in Mexico, having been cast as a major villain that blocked progress as delegates sought to strike a deal on new steps to curb global warming.

The thorniest issue during the 13-day conference, which wrapped up with a better-than-expected outcome in the early hours of Saturday, turned out to be a dispute between Japan and developing countries over the future of the Kyoto Protocol.

Developing countries wanted to continue to see developed countries committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions under the binding instrument beyond 2012, when its current five-year reduction obligation period expires.

Japan opposed setting a second round of reduction commitments because that would perpetuate a framework that does not include China and the United States, the world's top two carbon dioxide emitters, which are not subject to emissions cuts under the Kyoto pact.

It instead advocated creating a single new framework that binds all the major carbon dioxide emitters.

In the end, both sides got some of what they wanted: Japan a footnote in the agreed text and developing countries the inclusion of a goal of setting new emissions targets in the document with a reference to the "second commitment period" under the 1997 pact.

The footnote, a senior Japanese delegate said, "reserves Japan the right to refuse to participate" in the second commitment period even if it is created over the course of

future negotiations.

A substantive debate on the future of the Kyoto pact has been postponed until next year's climate meeting in South Africa or later. But if the growing calls for the second commitment period during the conference are any indication, Japan is likely to face tougher negotiations in the years ahead.

The intense criticism directed at Japan this year was largely of its own making, however. Japan started the conference by declaring that it rejects setting post-2012 binding emissions targets under the Kyoto pact under any circumstances, hardening the positions of developing countries.

"As Africans, we are at the forefront of climate change. Japan is letting the world down. It should stand tall and commit to the KP (Kyoto Protocol)," a frustrated delegate from Malawi said Friday as the deadlock over the pact left any outcome in Cancun uncertain.

The lack of progress at the conference also put in jeopardy the U.N. multilateral process to fight global warming, following the severe setback it suffered at last year's climate summit in Copenhagen, where countries failed to adopt a pact on reining in greenhouse gases.

Fearing a back-to-back failure, British Prime Minister David Cameron and U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon spoke with Prime Minister Naoto Kan by phone, with at least 20 leaders said to have tried to reach him.

"I didn't think (people) would focus on the KP issue this much," a senior Japanese negotiator in Cancun said, admitting the reaction Japan drew with its declaration was unexpected.

Japan was adamant about its opposition to setting a second commitment period under the protocol, but the inclusion of a footnote in the draft agreement paved the way for it to accept the deal.

"It wasn't easy to put it in. But what made it possible was diplomatic negotiation," the same negotiator said, acknowledging that without the footnote, Japan would not have been able to endorse the accord.

Japanese officials say Tokyo did not concede by accepting the agreement, and deny that its position has changed, when

compared with the one at the start of the conference on Nov. 30.

That observation is shared by Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren) Chairman Hiromasa Yonekura, who said in a statement, "I pay my respects to (the Japanese government's) consistent negotiation stance."

He added he expected Japan to "exercise further leadership" toward the next climate conference in 2011.

Yonekura's remarks are further testament to the pressure exerted by business lobbies on the Japanese government to oppose setting a second commitment period under the Kyoto pact.

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