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China will go further in climate change talks, UN official says

AFP, 24 April 2008 - The impact of climate change on China's environment will likely lead Beijing to make greater concessions in negotiations on a new global warming pact, a senior UN official said Thursday.



But developed nations must also put forward more equitable positions if talks for the new pact to replace the Kyoto Protocol can be finalised by next year, argued Yvo de Boer, the UN's top official on climate change.

"I've seen major changes in Chinese policies on climate change in recent years. It is first driven by the impact of climate change," de Boer told journalists on the sidelines of a global warming symposium here.

"China is willing to go further (on cutting greenhouse gas emissions), but it is saying that other nations need to step forward as well. We need to have an approach that is equitable," he said.

The United States and some other Western nations have balked at making mandatory cuts in greenhouse gases as developing nations like China, one of the world's biggest emitters of carbon dioxide, are not bound to slash emissions under the UN climate change framework.

China's per capita emissions were still 10 times lower than developed nations, de Boer said, while its late industrialisation meant its historical output of greenhouse gases was also comparatively smaller.

Meanwhile, global warming has contributed to a seven-fold increase in floods in China since the 1950s, de Boer said.

Unseasonably warm weather and reduced rainfall in its north have led to water shortages and a "dramatic" expansion of the Gobi desert, he said.

If efforts to curb global warming do not succeed, scientists project that China will face a 37 percent decrease in wheat, rice and corn yields in the second half of the century due to higher temperatures, he added.

"The Yangtze and Yellow rivers will first overflow as a result of the glaciers that feed them melting, and then those rivers will dry up with serious drinking water implications," de Boer said.

"Shanghai could be submerged by 2050 as a result of sea level rise unless action is taken."

Beijing was also being spurred to action due to the impact of an alarming worldwide rise in food and energy prices, he said.

"There is a huge economic interest for China to improve energy efficiency, reduce its dependence on fossil fuels and come to grips with air quality," he said.

De Boer said it was unfair to say that China as a developing nation has not taken on commitments to curb global warming, citing the nation's target of reducing energy consumption per unit GDP by 20 percent from 2006 to 2010.

China will also seek to raise its percentage of renewable energy sources to 16 percent of overall energy use by 2020.

De Boer, who heads the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, said he was in Beijing to urge speedy action to strengthen technology approaches in the context of the new climate change agreement set to be adopted in Copenhagen next year.

The new agreement, currently undergoing intense negotiation, is slated to go into

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effect in 2012 when the Kyoto Protocol expires.

"The challenge really is to... allow China to engage further without jeopardising goals of economic growth and poverty eradication," de Boer said.

"Here the international community will have to put in place technological and financial mechanisms that will allow countries like China to go that extra green mile."

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