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China seen onboard for climate pact goal

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By Chris Buckley

BEIJING (Reuters) - China is committed to seeking a climate change pact at key talks next year, the prime minister of Denmark said on Thursday, urging countries not to use global economic upheaval as a reason for delaying a deal.

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen is among the European leaders in Beijing for an Asia-Europe meeting. And with Copenhagen to host end-game talks late next year on a new climate change pact, he has been courting China, with its bulging output of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas behind global warming.

Rasmussen said on Thursday he had emerged from talks with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao the previous day with a commitment that China is "committed to reaching agreement in Copenhagen."

"The two sides ... affirmed the common goal to reach an agreed outcome and adopt a decision at the climate conference in Copenhagen in December 2009," he told a small group of reporters, citing an agreement the two countries sealed on Wednesday.

The negotiations, culminating late next year, aim to create a treaty building on the current Kyoto Protocol climate pact that expires at the end of 2012. Its host role has given Denmark an unusual prominence in seeking agreement.

With the world preoccupied with the financial crisis and its fallout, and with many issues dividing rich countries from poor ones over how to combat global warming, Rasmussen said China's commitment was an encouraging sign to others.

He said other countries should not use the economic downturn as a reason to delay or stymie a new pact.

"No doubt, the financial crisis will be used as an excuse to water down the climate change agenda," said Rasmussen, adding that he believed increased spending on environmentally friendly technology could help stimulate an economic rebound.

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European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said later that delaying tackling climate

change because of the crisis was not acceptable, and called on China to join in the fight.

"Yes, there is a cost to reducing emissions. But the cost of climate change is going to be far higher, including for China," he said in a speech.

"It is important that efforts to combat climate change stay on track, despite the financial crisis we are facing."

Under the current Kyoto pact, China and other developing nations do not have to agree limits on their output of the greenhouse gases from industry, vehicles and land-use that are dangerously warming the atmosphere.

But China's fast-rising emissions, which experts believe now far outstrip the United States', have driven other countries to say it must accept firmer limits.

EU environment ministers this week said developing countries should commit to keep emissions 15 to 30 percent below unconstrained "business as usual" levels.

Rasmussen said the EU proposal, which would not set an absolute ceiling on poorer countries' emissions but oblige them to take measurable steps, could be the way to draw China and other developing countries into the commitments.

"The contributions from the industrialized countries will not be enough," he said. "We need engagement from the big emerging economies."

At the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) opening on Friday, the 27 EU member states and the European Commission will also discuss climate change policy with Japan, China and India and 13 other Asian countries.

Rasmussen said he also hopes that meeting will agree on aiming for a pact in Copenhagen.

(Additional reporting by Ben Blanchard; Editing by Nick Macfie)

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