

US delivers message of urgency on climate change



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(AP) SIRACUSA, Sicily – The United States insisted Thursday that it had a common purpose and felt a sense of urgency over climate change, taking part in environment talks with other Group of Eight nations and developing countries.



Demonstrators parade in a protest against a G8 Environment Ministers meeting, in Siracusa, Sicily, Italy, Thursday, April 23, 2009.

Delegates are holding three days of talks in this eastern Sicilian city amid high expectations over the extent of the U.S. commitment to tackle climate change.

"The U.S. government now fully acknowledges the urgency and complexity of climate change challenges," said Lisa Jackson, the

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administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "And we know full well that a meaningful U.S. response to this challenge is absolutely essential."

The Siracusa meeting is intended to lay some groundwork ahead of a crucial U.N. conference in December in Copenhagen. That meeting aims to replace the 1998 Kyoto Protocol and draft a new agreement to regulate carbon emissions. The Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012.

The United States rejected Kyoto, with former President George W. Bush citing potential economic harm and lack of participation by developing countries like China or India.

President Barack Obama has made combating climate change a priority of his administration.

"I bring from President Obama a message of hope, his message of change and his message of common purpose for the environment," Jackson told reporters. She said she remains hopeful even as business lobbyists and others who are invested in the status quo "will try and come up with horror stories to pull us back."

Jackson would not discuss climate change negotiations or U.S. objectives in emission cuts in Copenhagen. She detailed the efforts currently under way in Washington to deal with the global warming of the planet and its effects on the world's population.

The EPA said earlier this month that rising sea levels, increased flooding and more intense heat waves and storms that come with climate change are a threat to public health and safety. The agency predicted that warming will worsen other pollution problems such as smog.

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It said that carbon dioxide and five other greenhouse gases are a major hazard to Americans' health. The move was seen as a first step to regulating pollution linked to climate change.

Top environmental advisers to Obama have broadly endorsed a Democratic House proposal to tackle climate change.

The draft bill would cap heat-trapping greenhouse gases and reduce the nation's reliance on fossil fuels.

It calls for a reduction of greenhouse gases by 20 percent from 2005 levels by 2020, and 83 percent by midcentury. It also includes measures aimed at reducing the use of fossil energy such as requiring utilities to produce a quarter of their electricity from renewable sources, and calling for tougher standards to promote conservation.

"It is my sincere hope that Congress can pass a new law to confront climate and energy challenges we all face," Jackson told reporters.

Delegates at the summit said Jackson's presence, just a day after she spoke at a hearing on climate in the House of Representatives, attested to the U.S. commitment.

"It shows that the Americans attach a lot of importance to these discussions," Stavros Dimas, the EU environment commissioner, said earlier Thursday.

Czech Environment Minister Martin Bursik, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, said if the United States approves an ambitious plan, "this could get us out of the deadlock and help get China and India on board so that we can get an agreement in Copenhagen."

The three-day meeting in Siracusa began

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on Wednesday — Earth Day.

As the delegates were gathering under heavy security in a 13th-century castle built by Emperor Frederick II, a few hundred anti-globalization protesters on Thursday staged a peaceful demonstration elsewhere in the city.

The Group of Eight comprises Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States.

Other participants at the Siracusa meeting include representatives from China — which has recently surpassed the United States as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases — India and Brazil.

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