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The U.N. at Cancun

Global reduction of carbon-dioxide emissions is going nowhere unless China and India sign on.

This year's installment of the U.N.'s annual holiday party has come and gone from Cancun, with little to show for it except the massive carbon footprint of thousands of attendees — official delegates of member nations, plus representatives of Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, and their ilk.

Technically, what we have just witnessed is the 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change, a.k.a. "COP16." These conferences always take place at this time of year, and often in the tropics or in the Southern Hemisphere, where it is now summer. Next year's confab will be in Durban, South Africa.

It's really poor planning to throw these parties in December. The weather in the Northern Hemisphere lately has been downright uncooperative. Cancun witnessed a 100-year record low temperature one day as the delegates got down to "business" for two weeks, actually accomplishing little of substance. Last year, when COP15 was held in Copenhagen, the weather was miserable, with frequent snow and unseasonably cold temperatures. The quintessential images from that conference were of Barack Obama pronouncing the meeting a great success, and then rushing back to Washington, only to land in a blinding snowstorm.

Copenhagen was an abject failure. The great "success" was a requirement that each nation submit a schedule for reductions in carbon-dioxide emissions. But that requirement was waived by the executive secretary of the Framework Convention, Yvo de Boer. Then he quit.

He was replaced by Costa Rica's Christiana Figueres, who welcomed the crowd to Cancun, invoking Ixchel, the Mayan goddess of weaving and creativity. Rather appropriate for an organization whose last climate report was made up out of whole cloth.

Predictably, Figueres pronounced the festivities a roaring success. "Cancun," she said, "has done

its job — the beacon of hope has been reignited.”

Sure — as in, Third World nations *hope* that the developed world’s governments will magically decide to donate them a trillion dollars over the next decade to “cope” with climate change.

Indeed, the delegates did agree to this “green fund,” but they failed to explain where the money will come from. All they agreed upon was how the nonexistent moneys are to be distributed.

Nor did they agree to anything that would commit any nation to reductions in carbon-dioxide emissions. However, you are free to submit a schedule that you don’t need to adhere to.

I’m sure that the U.N. can’t wait for the U.S. response on this one. It will appear in the form of some directive from the executive branch, specifically the EPA. But let us not forget — as I’m sure he has not — that the president’s party just got pummeled in the midterm elections. The more stringent the directive is, the more likely it is that Mr. Obama will leave Washington a private citizen in January 2013.

Even if he approves big (and impossible) cuts, it won’t do a measurable thing about global warming unless China and India agree to similar reductions. In fact, they have already informed the world — at both Copenhagen and Cancún — of their intent to *raise* emissions. China’s are on track to double in the next decade, and India’s look to increase threefold. Together, those two countries could easily be responsible for half of global emissions over the next two decades. The U.S. is currently responsible for about 20 percent of the total, and that percentage is steadily dropping. In 2009, China emitted a whopping 27 percent more than the United States.

The Cancun partiers couldn’t agree on any treaty or protocol to replace the failed Kyoto Protocol, which expires at the end of 2012. That one was supposed to “legally bind” the industrialized world to reduce its emissions to about 5 percent below 1990 levels by now. *That* language really worked, didn’t it? Emissions rose by more than they were supposed to fall. And even if all nations met their “obligations” under Kyoto, they were so insignificant that their effect could never be found by thermometers.

Kyoto was so unpopular that it was never brought up for ratification by the U.S. Senate. After the unceremonious death of cap-and-trade, are there going to be the 67 votes necessary to ratify something even more politically damaging?

It’s not easy to see the need for all these annual gatherings. In this fiscal climate, the developed world isn’t going to send a trillion bucks to Africa and a few tropical islands. Nor is any

agreement going to be enforceable.

If the U.N. delegates were serious about global warming, at least they could meet by Skype and GoToMeeting instead of burning hundreds of thousands of gallons of Jet A in pursuit of perennial failure.

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