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Copenhagen talks break down as developing nations split over 'Tuvalu' protocol

Developing countries have split between those who favor a new protocol proposed by Tuvalu and others who want to continue with the Kyoto agreement

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Activists hold a demonstration in support of Tuvalu, the Pacific island state which has proposed a new protocol. Photograph: Bob Strong/Reuters

Negotiations at the UN climate summit in Copenhagen dramatically broke down today after developing countries split between those who favor a new protocol and others who want to continue with the legally binding Kyoto agreement.

The crisis, partly precipitated by revelations yesterday that the host country Denmark had proposed a text which could have seen the death of the Kyoto protocol, threatens to divide the powerful G77 plus China group of 130 developing countries.

Tuvalu, a Pacific island state politically and financially close to Australia, proposed a new protocol which would have the advantage of potentially forcing deeper global emission cuts, but could lead to other developing countries - rather than rich nations - having to make those cuts.

Many developing nations cherish the legally binding commitments that Kyoto places on industrialized nations and fiercely oppose proposals that would change this.

Tuvalu was immediately supported by other small island states, including Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago and several African states. But it was opposed by 15 countries, including the powerful nations of China, Saudi Arabia and India. One of the two negotiating tracks was then suspended for several hours as no consensus could be reached.

Civil society groups including the TckTckTck campaign and 350.org demonstrated outside the meeting in favour of Tuvalu, chanting: "Tuvalu is the new deal."

Observers said a G77 plus China rift at this early stage in the conference was a serious setback for the big developing countries. Small island states, least developed countries and Africa have so far worked together in public with the G77.

In a separate development, a new draft text prepared by Denmark and other rich countries is known to make several compromises to developing countries. Sources close to the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Lokke Rasmussen, today indicated that the text contains a commitment to complete a legally binding agreement by December 2010. This is significantly more time than is wanted by the UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, and the UN secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, but is thought to be necessary to complete the legal work.

The new text also says that countries will work towards agreeing a new commitment period for the Kyoto protocol. This has been holding up talks because developing countries fear the Kyoto protocol will be abandoned. The document also makes reference to the present negotiations, in an apparent move to deflect criticisms that the UN process is being undermined by back-room maneuvering.

Elsewhere today, Britain, Mexico, Norway and Australia tabled a paper that strongly backs a major new climate fund for developing countries. This would be run by a board which would be accountable to the UN, where priority would be given to spending in the poorest and most vulnerable countries. It addresses the vexed question of how cash for developing countries to adapt to climate change should be raised and distributed.

Britain has proposed that an fund of \$10bn (£6.2bn) be set up immediately to pay poorer nations between 2012 and 2015. Developing countries want \$400bn (£246bn) to come on stream a year by 2020.

While the voices of climate sceptics have largely been drowned out in Copenhagen, former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin has intervened in the debate, saying President Barack Obama's "cap and tax" plan for cutting US greenhouse gas emissions would be an economic catastrophe. In a Washington Post article, which made no mention of climate change, she said Obama's plan

would outsource energy supplies to China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Obama's fiscal stimulus package gave \$94bn for green measures in the US, second only to China.