

LIFESTYLE

Top climate envoys more optimistic about sealing a global warming deal this year following a US-led meeting in Washington

Envoys optimistic about securing future climate treaty

WASHINGTON – Top climate envoys Tuesday said they were more optimistic about sealing a global warming deal this year after a US-led meeting of major economies, but they sparred on the level of their commitments.

US President Barack Obama, who champions action against global warming, invited negotiators from 17 other major economies including developing powers such as China and India to meet in Washington.

The talks came as the clock ticks to a December meeting in Copenhagen that is meant to approve a new global treaty to slow down the planet's rising temperatures.

"I come out of this meeting a bit more optimistic," Todd Stern, the chief US negotiator on climate change, told reporters.

His remarks were echoed by German Environmental Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who said: "I'm quite optimistic that we will succeed in December."

Agreement still pending

But he said that emerging countries still did not want to make binding commitments on how much they will cut carbon emissions.

"Today, there was no movement in this respect. It still is an open question," Gabriel said.

Developing nations say that they cannot come up with firm targets until they know the position of the United States.

Obama, who personally greeted all the envoys, has sharply changed US direction on climate change and vowed action despite the global economic crisis, hoping to create new jobs in green technology.

Obama's predecessor George W Bush was the main holdout

from the Kyoto Protocol, which he said was too costly and unfair, as the landmark environmental treaty makes no requirements of rapidly growing developing nations.

French Environment Minister Jean-Louis Borloo, while hailing the Washington talks as "constructive", said that Obama's reduction targets did not go far enough.

"It's a situation where we are

WE ARE VERY HAPPY ABOUT THE CHANGE IN ATTITUDE [AFTER GEORGE W BUSH]."

very happy at the change in attitude and at the same time that should not lower ambitions," Borloo said.

The US has agreed to cut its emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, while Europe has pledged to cut its own emissions by at least 20 percent of 1990 levels by 2020, and 30 percent if other advanced economies follow suit.

The Copenhagen conference will lay out global action after 2012, when Kyoto's obligations expire.

Marcelo Furtado, executive director of Greenpeace Brazil, said that wealthy nations have not yet made enough commitments for some developing states to feel comfortable to take action.

The talks involved Australia, Brazil, Britain, Canada, China, the European Commission, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, the United States, Denmark and the United Nations.

They will meet again in late May in Paris and at a location to be decided in June. AFP ■

Duo cycles Cambodia for environmental awareness

With 80,000 kilometres and 45 countries behind them, two determined cyclists take on the Kingdom's highways



Richard Ferge and Stani Martinkova in front of Wat Phnom. PHOTO SUPPLIED

BY ZOE HOLMAN

BETWEEN the exhaust fumes, colossal Land Rovers and hoards of hell-bent motorbike drivers, Cambodia's roads do not strike the visitor as particularly cyclist- or eco-friendly. Nonetheless, a duo of determined athletes are taking on the Kingdom's highways in the name of environmental awareness, armed only with their bikes, good will and a significant degree of road rage. In fact, with 80,000 kilometres and 45 countries under their figurative belts, "The Velomads", Richard Ferge and Stani Martinkova are taking on the globe.

Their journey started in 1996 in the Alaskan mountains when they embarked on a mission to Argentina with an eco-minded

transport policy of travelling only by bicycle and, where necessary, train or boat. But what started as a cycling tour of America quickly evolved into an environmental campaign and an eight-year physical epic in which the pair aimed to traverse 100 countries and 100,000 kilometres.

"While we were travelling, we met so many people who were cycling around the world, that we realised it was quite an easy thing to do," said Martinkova, a Czech-British NGO worker and lifelong cycling devotee.

For her partner, sommelier Ferge, the progression from two legs to two wheels did not come so naturally.

"When I first met Richard, he hated cycling. His last experience of riding was when he used to puncture holes in the

tyres of the bike he was forced to ride to school," Martinkova said. However, she quickly indoctrinated the Frenchman with the many economic and ecological virtues of cycling, and it seems he has taken to the pursuit with enormous zeal.

Driving passion

But it is primarily a passion for the environment that is driving the pair, who are using their journey to teach youth in classrooms in each country they visit about the dangers of climate change and environmental degradation.

The pair have had to contend with more than a few linguistic, cultural, political and legal barriers, but as Martinkova explains, the most difficult obstacle "The Velomads" have grappled with has been the degree

of environmental degradation they've witnessed.

"The most difficult thing has been the extreme pollution that's going on everywhere. It's really heartbreaking on a daily basis and we get so frustrated," Martinkova said.

The state of the Cambodian roads and physical environment has been particularly troubling.

"Cycling and walking is seen as being for poor people here, so everyone is rushing out to get their own moto or Range Rover without awareness of the long-term consequences," she said.

The Velomads will be living up to their name for sometime yet as they peddle their message at an average 80 kilometres a day from Phnom Penh through Southeast Asia and Australasia. ■

Sexiest Arab pop star says 'I do'

Lebanese singer Haifa Wehbe, known for her revealing outfits and controversial sexually suggestive songs, ties the knot at a star-studded Beirut bash last week

BEIRUT – Lebanese singer Haifa Wehbe, the biggest sex symbol on the Arabic pop scene, was set to celebrate her wedding at a star-studded bash last Friday, a day after a hush-hush private ceremony.

The voluptuous 35-year-old brunette model-turned-singer, known for her revealing outfits, said "I do" at a private wedding service in Beirut last week, her agent told AFP.

Al-Akhbar newspaper identified the lucky man who won Haifa's heart as Egyptian entrepreneur Ahmad Abu Hush-eima, one year her junior.

Guests at Friday's party are due to include American glamour model Carmen Electra, who gained fame by appearing in *Playboy* maga-



Lebanese singer Haifa Wehbe. AFP

zine, and singer Anastasia, the newspaper said.

Haifa started a trend across the Arab world in 2002 with her long dark hair and sultry looks, and does not shy away from sexually suggestive songs that are often the cen-

tre of controversy and blatant outrage.

The popular popstar is a self-professed fan of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Shiite militant group Hezbollah, which fought a deadly 34-day war with Israel in July 2006 that killed some 1,200 Lebanese and 160 Israeli troops.

"I admire his wisdom, his charisma," Haifa said in a Lebanese television interview after the war, adding that her admiration for Nasrallah grew after the war.

Haifa fled Lebanon to Egypt during the conflict but refused to sing in public until peace was restored in her home country.

Some more conservative Arab countries are highly critical of Haifa, who found fame

with a music video that featured her dancing in the rain in a red dress.

In April 2008, Bahrain's Islamist-dominated parliament approved a motion asking the government to ban a performance by Haifa on moral grounds – despite assurances by organisers that the superstar would dress modestly during the performance.

Nevertheless, a prim Haifa dressed in a floor-length, V-neck emerald gown sang for her Bahraini fans in Manama a few days later.

Her portfolio consists of mainly seductive love songs, but she has also released children's song, including one with the English title "Naughty" and a track called "Buss al-Wawa", or "Kiss my little woud". AFP ■

Dutch park signs point to gay 'cruisers'

THE HAGUE, Netherlands – A park near Amsterdam on Tuesday unveiled information signs pointing out spots where officials say gay men are known to have sex – so no visitors are taken by surprise.

The signs "clearly indicate what is happening in each zone; also those where gay men are known to practise 'cruising'," municipal spokeswoman Manon Koffijberg told AFP.

Cruising is a slang word used to describe the act of trawling for casual sex.

"If you don't want to be confronted by a vision of that sort, the signs allow you to avoid specific areas," said Koffijberg.

The De Oeverlanden park in Slotervaart, southwest of Amsterdam, is known as a place where homosexuals

from all over the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe go in search of sex partners.

Koffijberg said that while having sex in public was against the law, the park has been used for this purpose for so long that it has become *gedoog*, a Dutch word for tolerating unwanted behaviour.

The sexual activities of cruisers, she said, kept mostly to the bushes in the park, and the new signs sought to ensure that they stayed there.

"There are various groups of users of the park: people with small children who bathe on the beaches, those who walk their dogs, gays cruising and nature lovers," said Koffijberg.

"Things are arranged so that each group can relax in their own area without intruding on each other. AFP ■