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Climate deal fails to lift delegates' mood

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By Margot Roosevelt

Multiple Page View

Reporting from Copenhagen-- It was close to midnight Friday, and a few delegates from the South Pacific island of Tuvalu sat grim-faced in front of a conference hall TV screen watching President Obama defend the new global climate deal.

"This is very far from what many countries need for survival," said Gilliane Le Gallic, head of Alofa Tuvalu, a Paris-based nonprofit group and an official Tuvalu delegate. "This won't limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, so Tuvalu will be submerged, and its people have no place to go."

Although U.S. officials sought to put an upbeat spin on the last-minute deal that brought nations together in a nonbinding agreement on climate change, the mood among many participants in the grueling two-week negotiations was far from celebratory.

The cavernous exhibit hall that days earlier had teemed with thousands of exuberant lobbyists for rain forests, electric cars and carbon finance was all but empty as Matar Cisse, head of Senegal's "Great Green Wall" climate-adaptation project, rolled up his colorful posters.

Cisse was anxious to talk about his country's proposed project, a 4,350-mile green corridor with lakes and trees that would stretch from Dakar to Djibouti. All that is needed is millions of dollars from wealthy countries.

But the nonbinding climate deal left him skeptical that Africa would benefit.

"There are promises," he said in French. "But not the concrete action that Africa wants."

On either side of him, the booths of Malawi and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania were abandoned, their pamphlets on desertification strewn on the floor.

Anup Khastagir, a reporter for the Bangladeshi national news agency, was packing up brochures in a large box. "I'm collecting information," he said.

He hadn't had time before because he was filing three stories a day and sleeping four hours a night.

The conference's outcome "is frustrating," he said. "We are the most vulnerable country. But if we can't keep greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to below 350 parts per million, then everyone has a lot to lose."

Reaction from environmentalists ranged from lukewarm to hostile. U.S. groups that work closely with Obama administration officials were relatively positive.

"It strikes a credible blow against the single greatest environmental ill of our time," said Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

But others, including Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, were sharply critical.

"Merely acknowledging the weaknesses of the deal, as President Obama has done, does not excuse its failings," said Kassie Siegel of the Tucson center's Climate Law Institute. "We stand at the precipice of climatic tipping points, beyond which a climate crash will be out of our control."

On the final two days of the conference, more than 20,000 members of nongovernmental organizations, who had registered months earlier to be observers, were banned from the conference. United Nations organizers apologized; there was no room, especially with an unexpectedly large contingent of 119 heads of state.

Throughout the hall, where the NGO observers had swarmed earlier in the week, posters were tacked on walls with the slogan "Civil Society Has Been Removed from the Negotiations" in large capital letters, next to an outline of a human head with a superimposed X.

Proponents of many causes left their colorful detritus behind. There were certificates of "hypocrisy" for conservationists who contributed carbon to the atmosphere "to attend the conference in order to preach to others the virtue of a lower carbon lifestyle." Industry brochures titled, "How the bogus campaign against palm oil harms the poor." Posters supporting "Waste-Pickers on the Front Line Against Climate Change" -- think "Slumdog Millionaire" -- demanding carbon credits for the recyclers who comb garbage dumps.

At the Tuvalu booth, participants had given away most of the 5,000 comic books they had brought called "Our Planet Under Water." But a small pile was left on a counter. The cover showed two frantic-looking teenagers standing up to their hips in the ocean under a lone palm tree and holding a sign saying, "Small Is Beautiful."

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