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World Leaders Express Firm Support in Paris for Strong Global Climate Treaty

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Participants enter the COP21 global climate conference at Paris-Le Bourget where President Barack Obama expressed strong support for an international climate agreement. Left photo (c) John Berger. Right photo by Arnaud Bouisson.

Paris, France, December 1--Prominent world leaders, including President Barack Obama, President Xi Jinping, and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, arrived in Paris yesterday to open the UN's long-awaited COP21 global climate negotiations.

The huge international conference--one of the largest ever in France--seeks to deliver a global climate agreement to keep the world from overheating by more than 2°C.

Representatives of nearly 200 nations, including 150 heads of state and 50,000 other participants, gathered here at the vast Le Bourget conference. Other participants include official delegates, diplomats, technical experts, and representatives of civil society, NGOs, international agencies, and ordinary citizens.

Following soon after the [November 13 terrorist attacks](#) in Paris in which 130 people died, security is tight. Some 8,000 police, security guards, and soldiers are protecting the site and other Paris venues.

Dominating media coverage in Paris, COP21 is now a major focus of world attention. Hundreds of thousands of people had been expected to conduct massive demonstrations in Paris ahead of the conference, but all marches have been banned in Paris for security reasons.

Yet on November 28 and 29, preceding the conference, close to 600,000 people in 175 countries took part in 2,700 demonstrations in the largest global climate protests ever to underscore the urgent need for a binding climate protection agreement.

Delegates of some developing nations that are especially vulnerable to climate change are calling for an agreement to keep global temperatures from rising more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The meeting's official goal, however, is to hold temperatures below 2°C, a target that will itself be challenging, if attainable.

In contrast to the disappointing 2009 Copenhagen summit at which world leaders arrived near the end, the heads of state of the world's largest carbon emitters arrived in Paris for a high-profile start to the COP21 conference, indicating strong and unprecedented global political support for a meaningful global climate agreement.

Almost all of the nearly 200 countries in attendance, which are collectively responsible for nearly 100 percent of the world's emissions, have already submitted their voluntary National Climate Action Plans. These will play a major role in determining whether or not the world is ultimately able to keep global temperature from rising by more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels.

While the 2°C threshold has great political significance as a widely recognized negotiation target, it is not a climate safety threshold. Catastrophic effects of climate change are already being felt at the current 0.8° C global average temperature rise.

Experts have concluded that the national emission reduction plans proposed by the nations of the world and submitted to the UN climate group thus far are not sufficient to prevent global temperatures from exceeding the 2°C global target. Therefore, one topic sure to come up at the conference is whether these plans can somehow be made more ambitious prior to December 11.

Even if that is not accomplished, the achievement of a globally binding agreement would nonetheless serve as an important basis for putting the signatories on track to more ambitious future targets via regularly reviewed and strengthened emission reduction pledges.

In opening the conference, Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), said that the eyes of the world are on Paris, and that the world is counting on the COP21 delegates to arrive at a meaningful global climate agreement.

In his opening statement, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said, "Let us build a durable climate regime with clear rules of the road that all countries can agree to follow. Paris must mark a turning point. We need the world to know that we are headed to a low-emissions, climate-resilient future, and that there is no going back."

HRH The Prince of Wales reminded the delegates that their decisions will affect the fate of generations yet unborn. Climate change, he said, "magnifies every hazard and tension of our existence. It threatens our ability to feed ourselves; to remain healthy and safe from extreme weather; to manage the natural resources that support our economies, and to avert the humanitarian disaster of mass migration and increasing conflict."

To avoid catastrophe, he said, we must restrict climate change to less than two degrees by dramatically reducing carbon emissions, but he expressed confidence that this is possible.

"We have the knowledge, the tools and the money--only 1.7 percent of global annual consumption would be required to put us on the right low-carbon path for 2030," he said. "We lack only the will and the framework to use them wisely, consistently and at the required global scale. Governments collectively spend more than a trillion dollars every year on subsidies to energy, agriculture and fisheries. Just imagine what could be done if those vast sums supported sustainable energy, farming and fishing, rather than fossil fuels, deforestation and over-exploitation of the seas."

In a major address to the conference, President Barack Obama said, "I've come here personally, as the leader of the world's largest economy and the second-largest emitter, to say that the United States of America not only recognizes our role in creating this problem, we embrace our responsibility to do something about it."

Obama alluded to the dystopian future that unchecked climate change could create, but said, "That future is one we have the power to change."

Underscoring the urgent need for immediate action, the President paraphrased Washington State Governor Jay Inslee, saying, "We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change, and the last generation that can do something about it."



"Climate Guardians" dressed as angels demonstrate for climate justice and against coal power at the gates of the COP21 global climate conference at Paris-Le Bourget on opening day. (c) John Berger.

Citing America's economic progress while implementing clean technologies and in cutting greenhouse gases on schedule with "economic output at an all-time high," Obama asserted, "We have proved that strong economic growth and a safer environment no longer have to conflict with one another."

The President also called on fellow world leaders to avoid merely adopting another "stopgap solution" but to instead agree on an enduring long-term strategy that "gives the world confidence in a low-carbon future."

This would, he said, send an important signal to investors and businesses that the world is firmly committed to achieving that future. An ambitious agreement that could be updated and strengthened over time would also thereby "unleash the creative power of our best scientists and engineers and entrepreneurs to deploy clean energy technologies and the new jobs and new opportunities that they create all around the world."

In a statement that raises the bar for climate policy globally and in the U.S., Obama linked the issue of a strong global climate agreement with social justice.

"We seek in these next two weeks not simply an agreement to roll back the pollution we put into our skies, but an agreement that helps us lift people from poverty without condemning the next generation to a planet that's beyond its capacity to repair," he said.

The climate negotiations will continue with the aim of producing a final climate agreement or declaration by December 11. Surrounding the official negotiations are hundreds of exhibits, numerous press conferences, and a large number of side events and speakers on every imaginable aspect of climate change.

This is the first in a series of articles I am writing from the Paris climate talks where I am observing events from inside the restricted blue zone for accredited participants.

John J. Berger, PhD. (www.johnjberger.com) is an energy and environmental policy specialist who has produced ten books on climate, energy, and natural resource topics. He is the author of *Climate Peril: The Intelligent Reader's Guide to the Climate Crisis*, and *Climate Myths: The Campaign Against Climate Science*, and is at work on a new book about climate solutions.

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