

Diplomatic squalls spoil US climate conference

- White House admits errors
- European delegations protest

Washington

Disagreements over the proper response to the threat of global changes in climate disrupted last week's White House international environmental conference, causing the United States to withdraw its advertised proposals for a new research collaboration.

Expectations had been low for the hurriedly called conference, but few could have predicted how divisive it would actually become. President George Bush, who announced the meeting four months ago at the Malta summit, said he intended it to emphasize the importance of economics and international research collaboration in the environmental debate. But many of the 18 visiting delegations had been puzzled as to what the United States actually hoped to accomplish (see *Nature* 344, 694; 19 April 1990).

Despite the warning signs, the speed at which the conference decayed into protests and splinter groups apparently took US officials completely by surprise. By the time the meeting ended on 18 April, the United States had retracted or disowned two position papers, quelled a walk-out threat and tossed most of its promised "concrete proposals" overboard to save the foundering summit. One White House official described the two-day conference as a "major embarrassment", an appraisal that found little argument among US environmental groups.

According to diplomatic sources, the adversarial tone of the meeting was first set by John Sununu, the White House chief of staff, the staunchly conservative force behind the White House position that it is too soon to begin measures to counter global warming.

Sununu is said to have caught wind of a press conference planned by the European Communities to criticize the US emphasis on research rather than action. Through an intermediary, he sent word that future global warming negotiations could be seriously damaged by such a move.

As late as a week before the conference, the White House had been planning to assert that there is no scientific evidence for global warming, according to one administration source. However, last-minute lobbying by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy for a more balanced view seems to have prevailed. In his opening speech, Bush recalled a recent television talk show in which one scientist argued that the Earth could warm

by nine degrees by the end of the next century, while another scientist "saw no evidence of rapid change".

"Two scientists, two diametrically opposed points of view. Now where does that leave us?", Bush asked. "What we need are facts, the stuff that science is made of." Several delegations had warned the United States against emphasizing its own proposals during the two-day conference, especially since all those attending had agreed that the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was the proper body to set international global warming policy. But at the end of one of the working sessions, the delegates were handed a 12-page US 'Charter for Cooperation' including four specific proposals, apparently intended for approval at the conference.

In the document, the United States laid out plans for an undisclosed number of 'international institutes' for policy-orientated global change research. By combining science and economics, the centres could "provide a bridge between scientific research and the policy process". Other proposals included a computer network for global change research and international agreements for data sharing.

European delegates immediately objected to the unexpected document, and the United States withdrew it, claiming that it had been mistakenly released. "It was a tactical error", said White House science adviser D. Allan Bromley, the conference's co-chairman.

Michael Deland, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, told reporters: "Sometimes in the confusion of a conference, things get passed out that aren't supposed to be." But an hour later, US officials were defusing yet another crisis.

According to the environmentalists who discovered it, a two-page list of "talking points" and "debates to avoid" was accidentally left on a podium after an administration press conference. The internal memorandum, quickly leaked to

reporters, advised US officials which issues to emphasize and which to sidestep.

It is "not beneficial to discuss whether there is or is not warming, or how much or how little warming. In the eyes of the public we will lose this debate", the primer suggested. "A better approach is to raise the many uncertainties that need to be better understood on this issue." When speaking to the press, "don't let reporters position this conference as an attempt to delay serious decisions on this issue", the memorandum advised.

Bromley confirmed that the memorandum was authentic, but said that it had been produced by a "low-level White House employee" and had not dictated his responses.

As disastrous as the meeting was for environmental diplomacy, it may have actually achieved some of its goals in bringing economics to the global warming debate table. Several delegates said that they agreed with the US position that better economic analysis of global warming countermeasures is necessary.

Bromley said that the "gratifying news" from the conference was that many countries, including France, Canada and West Germany, were "systematically pulling back from their commitments" to targets such as 20 per cent reductions in carbon emissions by 2005. "They hadn't thought about the economics before", he claimed.

Bromley may be partly right. Although the French, whose heavy use of nuclear power places them among the lowest producers of carbon, have never moved very strongly for domestic carbon targets, carbon-target initiatives in both Canada and West Germany have run into unexpected political problems recently.

In both cases, the cost of the measures to the domestic economy has been a stumbling point. The West German initiative has been sidetracked by concern over the economic and environmental burden of East Germany. And a Canadian 'green paper' (consultative document) on carbon dioxide targets, which was expected early this spring, has been delayed for further economic analysis.

But several delegates said they were offended by the suggestion that they had come to learn economics at the United States' knee. "Do you believe we could go home and take such measures without anybody asking 'What are the economic effects?'" J. G. M. Alders, environmental minister for the Netherlands, asked rhetorically at a press conference. Those present also took issue with US statements that attributed political delays in carbon dioxide targets to "the Europeans learning about economics". As one participant put it, claiming that an abortive two-day meeting raised anyone's economic consciousness smacks of "searching through the conference debris for a success".

G. Christopher Anderson

EMBRYO RESEARCH

Britain votes yes

London

As *Nature* went to press, British Members of Parliament decided by 364 votes to 193 to allow carefully regulated research on human embryos up to 14 days from conception. □