

► believe that premature discussion of developing country obligations could detract from the main purpose of the Kyoto conference, at which developed countries are due to sign a legally binding emissions reduction protocol.

Climate change was not on the initial agenda of the Commonwealth conference. But British officials realized that the meeting would be an ideal occasion to try to generate consensus between Australia and other Commonwealth countries.

Another aim was to reduce the gap between developing countries and the United States, which confirmed last week that it will commit itself to a legally binding target to stabilize emissions at 1990 levels between 2008 and 2112, but only if there is 'meaningful participation' from key developing countries (see previous page). Argentina has in principle agreed. But other countries — including Brazil, China and India — so far remain opposed.

Environmental groups are also predictably angered, although their rhetoric has lacked some of its previous fire. "President Clinton's watching a house starting to burn. He wants to do something about it, but chooses to pull out the garden hose when he really needs a water truck," says Jennifer Morgan of the US Climate Action Network, based in Washington DC.

Some groups were optimistically expecting the United States to announce slightly more ambitious targets — perhaps a reduction in emissions to below 1990 levels — but coupled to much tougher conditions. Others, however, were privately relieved that Clinton confirmed his commitment to a legally binding target, rather than "just do nothing".

Last week, the Group of 77 (G77) nations and China endorsed the European Union's target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 15 per cent by 2010. One delegate from a major industrializing country says that this will remain the G77's "bottom line" position. Another developing country delegate says that the United States will have to make concessions if there is to be agreement at Kyoto.

The G77's endorsement of the European position was due to an agreement between the Alliance of Small Island States and oil-exporting countries about the latter's demands for compensation for revenues lost as a result of the reduced demand for oil. Both groups of countries have now agreed to

call for compensation for any country that suffers damage from the effects of either climate change or climate change policies.

Meanwhile, discussions this week in Bonn between the United States and developing countries — the last formal negotiations before Kyoto — have been making little headway. A two-day informal meeting before the start of the formal talks on 20 October resulted in deadlock.

Nonetheless, efforts to bring the US and developing country positions closer will continue during this week's visit to the United States by China's president Jiang Zemin. Three days of direct talks hosted by Japan are also scheduled in the second week of November.

Ehsan Masood

Climate panel to expand its membership

[BONN] The United Nations' advisory panel of climate scientists is to be expanded, and its procedures restructured, according to Bob Watson, the incoming chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

In future, the panel will include more scientists from developing countries and economies in transition, and business and development groups, Watson told the UN climate meeting in Bonn last week (see above). Reviews of scientific literature will also include material in languages other than English.

IPCC's Third Assessment Report on the world's climate, and a summary 'Synthesis' report for policymakers, will be ready by 2001, he said. The main report will focus heavily on regional aspects of climate change, while the synthesis report will consider key policy-relevant topics. Proposed answers to these will be circulated to governments for comment before being approved by the IPCC.

The changes have been partly designed to reduce conflict between scientists representing governments and those belonging to

independent research establishments. The previous second assessment report, particularly the summary document, was often surrounded by controversy (see *Nature* 378, 524; 1995).

Policymakers wanted answers to specific policy-related questions in language they could understand.

But the scientists drafting the reports were reluctant to stray beyond the confines of science, whose findings were often uncertain or subject to debate, a position which confused policymakers.

E. M.

Controversy flares over AIDS prevention trials in third world

[WASHINGTON] A furious exchange between researchers at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and public health advocates, carried out in letters to the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), has fanned the flames of a growing controversy around the ethics of US government-sponsored trials seeking to prevent perinatal AIDS transmission in developing countries.

At issue is whether it is any longer justified to use placebo in these trials when an expensive but effective therapy has been found and is routinely used in women in industrialized countries.

On 23 October, Public Citizen, a Washington-based advocacy group, wrote to Donna Shalala, the HHS secretary, pointing out that researchers at the JHU School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland, had "tentatively" dropped plans for a placebo arm in an NIH-funded trial set to begin in Ethiopia as soon as February.

The trial, involving some 900 women, had originally proposed comparing short, less expensive regimens of an anti-AIDS drug, zidovudine (AZT), in pregnant women, against women given a placebo. The JHU researchers, Neal Halsey and Andrea Ruff, say that they have made "contingency plans" to modify the trial design by dropping the placebo arm "if other studies document the effectiveness of a practical short course regimen [of AZT] in a developing country".

The doctors at Public Citizen, Peter Lurie and Sidney Wolfe, jumped on this as evidence that the JHU researchers are "acknowledging that it is possible to conduct a scientifically valid and useful study without the use of a placebo arm". They demanded in their letter that Shalala immediately order US government-sponsored researchers "to stop any arm of their studies in which women are denied access to antiretroviral drugs, and to provide at least short-term

AZT for all women now getting a placebo."

The next day, the JHU researchers shot back a letter of their own to Shalala. "Our changes are not being made to accommodate any outside groups," they said. Rather it was in response to information expected early in 1998 from other United Nations and US-supported trials.

They accused Public Citizen of spreading "mistruths and distortions" in press releases and said Wolfe and Lurie "have deliberately misrepresented our position and actions in an attempt to undermine the ongoing trials" of AZT in developing countries. Wolfe, in turn, accused Ruff and Halsey of "cheap justifications of what they are doing."

A spokesman for Shalala, said on Saturday that Shalala would have no immediate response to the letters. But, he added "we're keenly aware of the ethical implications of these experiments and we are always looking at new information."

Meredith Wadman