SPECIAL REPORT

Obama's win refreshes key climate talks

As all eyes turn to Poland for the start of the United Nations meeting next week, **Jeff Tollefson** looks at what progress is likely to be made.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference that begins in Poznań, Poland, on 1 December will in some ways mark the end of an era. The United States' long-standing opposition to climate regulation is vanishing, offering new opportunities for cooperation with its allies in Europe and beyond.

But to some extent, international climate negotiators will remain in limbo until 20 January 2009, when US President-elect Barack Obama enters the White House. Obama has advocated forceful domestic action on global warming and re-engagement with the international community.

"There is a lot of hope and a lot of optimism," says Rob Bradley, who heads international climate policy at the World Resources Institute, an environmental think tank in Washington DC. "A lot of countries will be willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the new administration — but they are all very aware that in Poznań they will be talking to the old administration."

The meeting will bring together representatives from some 192 countries in an ongoing effort to craft a global-warming accord to succeed the Kyoto Protocol, which was adopted in 1997 and expires in 2012. UN officials hope to reach a successor agreement in Copenhagen next year to leave time for implementation and ratification. Yet many think that goal is too ambitious, especially at a time when world leaders are worried about the global economy.

Poland has cited economic reasons in trying to build a coalition to block a European Union rule that, among other things, would require full auctioning of carbon allowances in 2013. But Saleemul Huq, of the International Institute for Environment and Development in London, thinks that opposition is now waning. He says the European Council might even move ahead with the rule as early as 12 December, the last day of the Poznań conference. The US re-engagement will only help, he says. "People will have a more rosy outlook in terms of being able to achieve something," says Huq, "and that will probably bend the European position in a more positive direction."

The United States, which is responsible for most of the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere today, has been largely out of international climate negotiations since President George W. Bush rejected the Kyoto agreement in 2001. If the country re-engages with mandatory emissions limits, it will eliminate an easy excuse for China — now the world's largest emitter — and other rapidly developing nations to remain on the sidelines.

But first the United States must get its own house in order. On 18 November, Obama made clear that he intends to be taken seriously on the international climate stage. In a videotaped address to a governors' climate summit, he reiterated campaign pledges to set up a federal cap-and-trade system for greenhouse gases similar to the European trading scheme, with reductions to 1990 levels by 2020 and 80% below that by 2050.

He also said he had asked any representatives from Congress to report back from Poznań on the talks there — quashing any speculation that he might send his own team of observers. Several other members — including California Democrat Barbara Boxer, who chairs the Senate committee with jurisdiction over global-warming regulation — will send staff.

As it stands, the US delegation will once again be headed by Harlan Watson and

Paula Dobriansky, of the State Department, and possibly Jim Connaughton, head of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Although the trio are likely to lose their posts in the new administration,

permanent mid-level staff can continue negotiating countless technical details under Obama. These might include working out how to make emissions reductions among all countries "measurable, reportable and verifiable", and how to create tools and institutions to track factors such as deforestation and compensating countries that preserve their forests.

Deforestation will be among the key issues on the table in Poznań. Last year at a UN climate conference in Bali, international negotiators agreed to include in the next agreement

reducing deforestation, which releases carbon stored in plants and soils. Papua New Guinea, Costa Rica and other tropical countries have banded together to push for some kind of resolution, seeing the potential for new streams of money flowing into forest-conservation projects from industrialized nations seeking to offset emissions.

Asking the right questions

Negotiators seem to be coalescing around the idea that each country will need to establish national baselines for deforestation, and those that can reduce deforestation below those levels would be eligible for funding. "I think overall we're past the questions of can we measure deforestation, and can we measure reductions in it," says Douglas Boucher, who heads the tropical forests and climate initiative at the Union of Concerned Scientists advocacy group from Washington DC. "It's a question of how we do it."

However, the question of how to pay won't be settled in Poznań — in part because that issue is tied up with broader debates about how and to what extent industrialized nations should provide aid to the developing world.

Poznań could, however, see the launch of a new adaptation fund, as agreed to last year in Bali. The idea is to tap money being collected through a 2% levy on the purchases under the Clean Development Mechanism, which allows developed countries to offset their emissions by funding clean-energy projects or otherwise reducing emissions in developing countries. Funds would be used to help poor countries adapt to a warmer climate — for example,

Action by the United States on greenhouse emissions would put more pressure on countries such as China and Poland to follow suit.

by developing drought-resistant crops or preparing for higher sea levels.

Some, like Bradley, see that as only a first step. He says detailed assessments need to be worked out at the country level before these funds begin to flow, and even then the amount of money is not remotely on the scale needed. The fund could hold from US\$270 million to \$600 million by 2012, according to World Bank projections. By contrast, the United Nations has called for industrialized nations to provide around \$86 billion annually by 2015 to help developing countries cope with a warmer world.

UN climate chief Yvo de Boer acknowledges that progress will be slow in Poznań, but says that is to be expected. He hopes delegates will be able to get their first look at negotiating text and begin fleshing out the details. "I don't think that every meeting needs to be spectacular or can be spectacular," he says. "In fact, Poznań is a meeting at which people just need to get on with their work and move the process forwards."

Political realignment in the United States might open new doors, but it could take weeks or even months for the Obama administration to create its negotiating team and get organized. De Boer says the EU is thinking of proposing another ministerial-level meeting before Copenhagen, in part to move things forwards with the new US team.

Regardless, it could be hard for Obama to make meaningful commitments at the international table without having made significant progress at home. His address last week

came as a surprise; given the ongoing financial crisis, many had expected him to shy away from specifics on climate in his first year in office. During his campaign, Obama largely avoided talking about climate regulation, instead focusing on the more palatable assessment that 'green jobs' in the energy sector could help revive a stalled economy.

Battle on two fronts

Shortly after Obama's speech last week, Boxer announced plans to introduce in January a climate bill directing the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to establish a cap-and-trade programme. This leaves many of the details that would otherwise be negotiated in Congress up to the EPA, but the legislation itself would be much simpler and could be ready for early action next year. In the House of Representatives, Democrats also accelerated the path toward climate legislation by replacing John Dingell of Michigan, a long-time ally of Detroit's automobile industry, with liberal environmentalist Henry Waxman of California as chairman of the powerful Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Obama will need to negotiate simultaneously on both the domestic and international fronts, keeping in mind that the Senate must ultimately approve both domestic legislation and any eventual international treaty. He is unlikely to want to negotiate a treaty on his own, the way President Bill Clinton did with Kyoto, and then try to sell it to senators; nor will he want Congress to pass a bill that would effectively limit

his ability to deal on the international stage.

Timothy Wirth, president of the United Nations Foundation, a public charity in Washington DC, also sees potential for the president to directly engage with China and find ways for the world's two largest polluters to work together. "It's like a ladder: on one side of the ladder is the United States and on the other side is the Chinese and you are building these rungs between the two," he says. "Slowly but surely, by the time you get to Copenhagen, you've got the two countries with common interests."

Although China is aggressively pursuing renewable energy and efficiency gains in its heavy industries, it has so far refused to make any firm commitments on reducing greenhouse-gas levels. Pan Jiahua, who heads the Research Centre for Sustainable Development at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, says he does not see that situation changing before Copenhagen. "China is a very active player on the climate negotiations front," he says. "China is hesitant to make any concrete commitments, but that does not mean it is not active."

Robert Stavins, an environmental economist at Harvard University, says negotiators could sign an agreement on some basic principles in Copenhagen and then work out the details in subsequent years. He adds that it took three years to flesh out the Kyoto protocol after it was signed.

"As in any negotiation, what you want to start with is what you agree on," Stavins says. "If you start with what you disagree on, you don't get anywhere."