

Climate experts warn Arab states: Change or suffer

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BEIRUT: Arab states must find a common position on tackling climate change or face "catastrophic" consequences, a gathering of global warming experts in Beirut were told Monday. Delegates were gathered for a two-day workshop aimed at preparing Arab countries to engage in negotiations on the International Climate treaty that will supersede the Kyoto protocol in 2012. The protocol, which 192 countries have signed, is widely considered inadequate to prevent the process of climate change and scientists are lobbying for tougher measures to be taken to prevent further damage to the planet.

Speakers at the workshop told a group of representatives from governments, civil society, business and academia that Arab leaders did not seem to appreciate the threat posed to the Middle East region by climate change, or the significance of the negotiations currently being debated.

The executive director of the activists' network IndyACT, Wael Hmaidan, told delegates: "Most Arab governments are unaware that one of the most important treaties in the history of the planet is being drafted. This treaty is considered as our last chance to save the planet from climate change." Hmaidan also questioned the commitment of governments to tackling the problem. "We don't have the political will to solve this," he said. "Most Arab countries are not making this a priority."

AUB Professor Nadim Farajalla, Research Director of the Issam Fares Institute's climate change program, warned that failure to meet the challenges posed by global warming could be disastrous. "Climate change is a scientific fact and Arab countries have to stave off its negative impacts," he said. "Not a single country will be immune to the ... severe consequences."

However, despite the dire predictions, experts have warned that the changes required to stop man-made climate change may be put off because they will be expensive and unpopular with governments already undergoing difficult financial circumstances.

Habib al-Habr, the director of the United Nations Environment Program in West Asia, warned that the world financial meltdown has come at a bad time for climate change campaigners. "The current global financial crises and the possible global economic downfall are likely to affect the outcome of the negotiations," he said. "The Middle East will be most impacted by climate change."

He presented graphs and statistics that demonstrated how serious the problem was for the region. One study showed that water and food supplies in the Arab world would be at risk, as the land in the region degraded and human health deteriorated.

"Developing countries are more vulnerable," Habr warned.

Katherine Watts, a policy officer at the Climate Action Network, said that there was little time left to solve the problem.

"The really scary thing is the timing. We don't have a lot of time," she warned. She said that by 2020, developed countries needed to reduce their carbon output by at least 25 percent, and by 2050, the same countries needed to be producing 95 percent less carbon than today. "This is a question of political will," she said. "We can do it, but it is ambitious."

The two-day workshop, which was organized by IndyACT, the Issam Fares Institute and the Heinrich Boll Foundation, will agree on a regional statement on climate policy. Its findings will be published in a report, which will be circulated around key decision makers in the Arab world next month. The report's recommendations are expected to help the Arab League formulate its policy position for the treaty negotiations.

The new treaty is being negotiated at the UN and is due to be completed by December 2009, when it will be presented at a conference in Copenhagen before coming into force in 2012.