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HEADLINE: Climate Talks Shift Focus to How to Deal With Changes

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BODY:
The global climate is changing in big ways, probably because of human actions, and it is time to focus o adapting to the impacts instead of just fighting to limit the warming. That, in a nutshell, was the idea tha dominated the latest round of international climate talks, which ended on Friday in New Delhi.

While many scientists have long held this view, it was a striking departure for the policy makers at the talks -- the industry lobbyists, environmental activists and government officials. For more than a decade, their single focus had been the fight over whether to cut smokestack and tailpipe emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping greenhouse gases.

Many environmentalists had long avoided discussing adaptation for fear it would smack of defeatism.

Experts espousing the views of industry were thrilled with the shift in New Delhi.

"By building capabilities to deal with climate change, we'll be much better off than by just paying attention to global warming," said Myron Ebell, who directs climate policy for the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a private group that opposes regulatory approaches to environmental problems.

Although they conceded its importance, environmental campaigners said an approach that focused on adapting to climate change rather than preventing it would inevitably fail, because the impact of unfettered emissions would eventually exceed people's ability to adjust.

Moreover, many said, coral reefs, alpine forests and other fragile ecosystems -- without the resiliency of human societies -- would simply be unable to cope with fast-changing conditions.

The change in attitude, expressed in the negotiations and in a formal declaration adopted Friday, has been partly driven by unusual weather this year -- record floods in Europe, landslides in the Himalayas, searing drought in southern Asia and Africa.

No single weather event can be linked to human-caused warming. But as the costs of weather-related disasters rise, unease about climate change rises, too. So far this year, unusual weather is blamed for

9,400 deaths and $56 billion in damage, according to the United Nations and insurers, and deaths and costs have been rising for years.

Another impetus is the rising realization that many significant shifts have already been set in motion by a century-long accumulation of warming gases.

Even if emissions stopped today, some experts say, the volume of greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere would slowly raise sea levels for a century or two as warmed water expands and terrestrial ice melts. The result would be coastal erosion and salt water intrusion into water supplies.

The new focus suits the agendas of the Bush administration and many developing countries, which for different reasons want to avoid cutting emissions of the warming gases. But some environmental campaigners say the shift will discourage efforts to cut dependence on fossil fuels like coal and oil, the main source of the offending gases, in favor of building dikes, designing hardier crops or other engineering fixes.

"Adaptation is like the 'wear sunglasses and a hat' theory of fighting ozone depletion," said Kert Davies, the research director for Greenpeace, referring to the Reagan-era debate over chemicals that were weakening the earth's atmospheric shield against harmful radiation.

In that case, the offending synthetic chemicals were banned under a 1987 treaty, but only because damage to the ozone layer had become vividly apparent in satellite images -- and because industry had come up with alternatives.

But no ready substitutes exist for cheap, plentiful fossil fuels. Many experts say the use of coal and oil is bound to keep rising for decades, particularly as poor countries climb the economic ladder from bicycles and water buckets to cars and washing machines.

Conservative policy analysts said proposed curbs on fuel use were thus unrealistic and unjustified, while making countries more resilient to extremes of weather made sense for many reasons. One goal, Mr. Ebell said, should be to enable low-lying countries like Bangladesh to respond to typhoons the way Florida responds to hurricanes.

There are also ways to foster development in poor countries that limit harm from climate change. Experts say that in semi-arid zones in Africa and Asia, agricultural assistance could improve farmers' ability to endure heat and drought.

In some areas, adaptation is already under way. In the Himalayas, some communities, with the help of the United Nations, are installing alarm systems to warn of flash floods as expanding lakes of glacial meltwater grow to the bursting point in the next decade.

Low-lying island nations, like the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, have been watching the slow rise of the seas for decades and have not only been planning to build storm barriers, but possibly to evacuate entirely at some point.

The emphasis on adapting is a profound turnabout from the course set a decade ago after President George Bush and other world leaders signed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Though that treaty and subsequent addenda contained vague commitments by industrial nations to help vulnerable countries adapt, the emphasis was always about curbing emissions to prevent dangerous changes in the climate system.

Adaptation got support in New Delhi because it suits both the current Bush administration, which has tried to shift debate away from emissions reductions, and developing countries, which have expressed frustration at the developed world's inertia in limiting its own emissions and its delays in pledged aid.

At the meeting, poorer countries did not quite say it was their turn to pollute but, led by the host country, they did demand the right to grow out of destitution, a path that will require vast use of existing fuel reserves -- mainly coal.

Opening the plenary session last Wednesday, India's prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, said per capi use of such fuels by the world's poorest populations was a fraction of that of people in the industrial powers. Mitigating fuel use, he said, "will bring additional strain to the already fragile economies of the developing countries."

The adaptation issue also got support from a new scientific analysis, published Friday, suggesting that the only way to safely stabilize greenhouse gases by midcentury was with a hugely ambitious Apollo-siz research program on fusion, solar power, and other nonpolluting energy sources.

The lead authors of that study echoed other experts in saying it was nearly inconceivable that the Bush administration or Congress would finance such a costly crash program.

They also said that modest emission reductions called for under the Kyoto Protocol, a climate treaty supported by Europe and Japan, would not be enough to spur governments and businesses to seek the necessary technological shift. The protocol, an addendum to the 1992 climate convention, is moving toward taking legal force sometime next year, when Russia is expected to ratify it. But President Bush has rejected it, and without the adherence of the United States, the world's biggest source of greenhouse gases, the Kyoto pact's impact on climate will be negligible, scientists and treaty experts say.

Still, some experts said Kyoto's significance should not be discounted. "Your first trip to the gym doesn' improve your health, but you've got to get into a regular habit," said David D. Doniger, the director of climate policy for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a private group. "Kyoto is that first trip. It provides a structure to build on."

Mr. Doniger and other veterans of the climate wars with varying perspectives said the best -- and perhaps only -- hope lay in a blend of all of the above: a mix of finding ways to improve energy efficiency now; to protect the most vulnerable countries and ecosystems from accelerating change; and to push the technological frontier to determine if any far-flung solutions can come to the rescue.

Dr. Martin I. Hoffert, the New York University physicist who led the new clean-energy study, said he was confident that technology held an eventual solution. "We started World War II with biplanes, and seven years later had jets," he said.

But he and other climate experts acknowledged that wartime innovations emerged in crisis, not ahead of a slow-moving environmental shift.

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GRAPHIC: Photos: Meissen, Germany, was inundated last summer by floodwaters from the Elbe

River. Flooding in eastern Germany was the worst in 150 years. (Reuters); A three-acre crop of maze in Chikomba, Zimbabwe, was ruined by a severe drought that has caused food shortages in southern Africa. (Agence France-Presse); Natural disasters, like this landslide in Nepal, have caused experts to rethink their approach on dealing with changes in global climate. (Associated Press)

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