

Observations from an Orthodox Christian at the COP-21 UN Summit on Climate

Citing a Looming Global Climate Crisis, World Leaders Gather for Talks

Report from notes by Fred Krueger
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The Opening Ceremonies

Le Bourget, Paris, France — World leaders gathered this morning to began a multinational effort that will develop a plan to hold off the worst consequences of climate change.

Reporters from the world’s major media, plus thousands of delegates and observers streamed into a heavily fenced and fortified area set up especially for this summit sponsored by the United Nations. Helicopters brought in heads of state while buses carried the majority of attendees from the Le Bourget train station about two miles away. Each person went through intense security checks while French police circled the area.

French President Francois Hollande opens proceedings

Francois Hollande opened this United Nations global summit on climate change with an address that was eloquent, insightful and specific with its bold recommendations. He called for massive action to prevent catastrophic climate change.

“Never have the stakes of an international conference been so high,” said President Hollande before a packed plenary session. “What is at stake is no less than the future of the planet, the future of life,” he declared.

“This is a historic gathering. 150 heads of state are gathered here. Never before have so many world leaders gathered together. Never before have the stakes been so high. This summit on global climate change is about the future of the planet.

“The eyes of the world are upon us. We must leave a planet preserved for the future. All temperature records are being broken. Levels of carbon dioxide are rising, so are extreme weather events, droughts, flooding, hurricane intensities. These are all on the increase. The rate of polar ice melt, rising sea levels, the changing chemistry of the oceans, millions and millions of people are affected.... The annual costs are already in the billions of dollars. Global warming is happening now.”

“Global warming,” he said, “heralds future conflicts just as clouds herald a storm. It causes migration which throws more refugees out onto the roads than warfare itself.” He recognized that never -- "truly NEVER," he emphasized -- have the stakes of an international meeting been so high. The future of the planet, and the future of life, are at stake.”

He told the audience and the world that "2015 is a year that has beaten all previous records..." Record high temperatures, record CO₂ concentrations and record numbers of extreme climate events. This has caused droughts, floods, cyclones, melting ice, rising sea levels and ocean acidification.

We have a responsibility to poor countries. They have done the least to bring about this change, but they are impacted the most. Our industries must change their ways. So much ordinary people. We are facing an emergency. Our greatest challenge is to move beyond an era of competition to an era of cooperation.

President Hollande acknowledged the recommendations of scientists around the world, including the IPCC, that "to prevent catastrophic and irreversible climate change we must keep warming below 2° C from pre-industrial levels." He said we [world leaders] "need to define and mark out a credible path that will enable us to contain global warming below 2° C or even 1.5° C, if possible."

The National Presentations

The proceedings then moved into a series of opening statements. Top world leaders lined up will provide statements representing how climate change is understood by the major nations of the world. President Obama will speak first, followed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, then Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, and others. Each leader will provide a perspective on climate change and outline how this deepening problem should be addressed.

Many spoke of the urgency of the task, but also the hope that a deal could be reached regardless of the initial differences voiced by various leaders. This optimistic tone brought a spirit of hope and congeniality to the opening of COP21. During the next two weeks, diplomats together with an army of bureaucrats and assorted delegates plan to forge a new international agreement to reduce planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

As the conference opens, a growing body of peer-reviewed scientific evidence shows that the destructive effects of climate change are already beginning to sweep the planet. At the same time the global economy continues to spew out fossil fuel emissions that are causing rising sea levels, intense droughts and food shortages, more destructive storms and floods, and many other catastrophic effects.

Previous efforts to reach agreements have seen nations prioritize their own national situations without respect or regard for the global picture. This year the United States and China, the planet's two largest greenhouse gas polluters, have negotiated a private deal to reduce emissions. Today President Obama and President Xi urged others to join them in solving the climate problem. This common sense of purpose signaled a new tone in COP interchanges and introduced a spirit of cooperation in the negotiations which has been absent in previous COPs.

Remarks by President Obama

“President Hollande,
Mr. Secretary General,
Fellow leaders.
We have come to Paris to show our
resolve....



“Nearly 200 nations have assembled here this week.... We face the growing threat of climate change [which] could define the contours of this century more dramatically than any other. What should give us hope that this is a turning point... is the fact that our nations share a sense of urgency about this challenge and a growing realization that it is within our power to do something about it.

“Our understanding of the ways human beings disrupt the climate advances by the day. Fourteen of the fifteen warmest years on record have occurred since the year 2000 – and 2015 is on pace to be the warmest year of all. No nation – large or small, wealthy or poor – is immune to what this means.”

Before the entire gathering President Obama admitted that the United States has been responsible for a large share of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as well as some blame for the damage that these emissions have brought to the planet's atmosphere.

He declared that the growing threat of climate change would define this century more dramatically than any other action. “I’ve come here personally, as the leader of the world’s largest economy and the second-largest emitter... to say that the United States of America not only recognizes its role in creating this problem, but we embrace our responsibility to do something about it.”

Already, prior to Paris, more than 180 countries representing nearly 95 percent of global emissions have put forward their own climate targets. That is progress. For our part, America is on track to reach the emissions targets that I set six years ago in Copenhagen – we will reduce our carbon emissions in the range of 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. And that's why, last year, I set a new target: America will reduce our emissions 26% to 28% below

2005 levels within 10 years from now.

One of the enemies that we'll be fighting at this conference is cynicism, the notion we can't do anything about climate change. Our progress should give us hope during these two weeks, hope that is rooted in collective action....

Here, in Paris, let's secure an agreement that builds in ambition, where progress paves the way for regularly updated targets – targets that are not set for each of us but by each of us, taking into account the differences that each nation is facing.

Here in Paris, let's agree to a strong system of transparency that gives each of us the confidence that all of us are meeting our commitments....

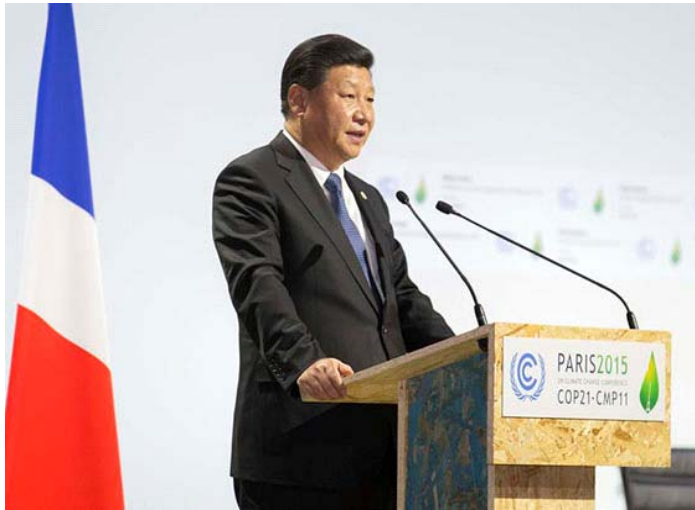
Here in Paris, let's make sure that resources flow to the countries that need help preparing for the impacts of climate change that we can no longer avoid. We know that many nations have contributed little to climate change but will be the first to feel its most destructive effects. For some, particularly island nations... climate change is a threat to their very existence.

And finally, here in Paris, let's show businesses and investors that the global economy is on a firm path towards a low-carbon future. If we put the right rules and incentives in place, we'll unleash the creative power of our best scientists and engineers and entrepreneurs to deploy clean energy technologies and the new jobs and new opportunities that they create all around the world. ... Let's send that signal.

That's what we seek in these next two weeks. Not simply an agreement to roll back the pollution we put into our skies, but an agreement that helps us lift people from poverty without condemning the next generation to a planet that's beyond its capacity to repair. ...

For I believe, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that there is such a thing as being too late. And when it comes to climate change, that hour is almost upon us. But if we act here, if we act now, if we place our own short-term interests behind the air that our young people will breathe, and the food that they will eat, and the water that they will drink, and the hopes and dreams that sustain their lives, then we won't be too late for them.

Chinese President Xi Jin-ping



President Xi also spoke to the delegates. As he spoke, China and other parts of Asia were experiencing an air pollution "red alert" because of record levels of particle pollutants, leaving cities and suburbs submerged in a dense and sickening smog.

President Hollande, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thanks to joint efforts of all parties since the United Nations Convention on Climate Change entered into force over 20 years ago, global actions on climate change have made progress, although there are still numerous difficulties and challenges. This Paris Conference is hence convened to strengthen implementation and bring about a comprehensive, balanced, ambitious and binding agreement on climate change.

A successful international agreement should not just address immediate challenges but more importantly, it should also present a vision for the future. The Paris agreement should focus on strengthening post-2020 global actions on climate change and boost global efforts to pursue sustainable development.

The Paris agreement should help galvanize global efforts and encourage broad participation. The agreement should provide institutional arrangements that propel countries to make concerted efforts. Besides governments, it should also mobilize businesses, non-governmental organizations and all players in society to participate in international cooperation on climate change, thus raising public awareness of pooling resources on climate change.

This Paris agreement should help increase input of resources to ensure actions on climate change. To obtain financial and technical support for capacity building is essential for developing countries to address climate

change. Developed countries should honor their commitment of mobilizing US \$100 billion each year before 2020 and provide stronger financial support to developing countries afterwards. It is also important that climate-friendly technologies should be transferred to developing countries to help them build green economy.

The Paris agreement should accommodate the national conditions of various countries and lay emphasis on practical results. It is imperative to respect differences among countries, especially developing countries, in domestic policies, capacity building and economic structure. A one-size-fits-all approach must be avoided. Addressing climate change should not deny the legitimate needs of developing countries to reduce poverty and improve their people's living Standards. Special needs of the developing countries must be well attended to.

In concluding, President Xi emphasized, "Climate change is a huge challenge. It is "very important for China and the United States to be firmly committed to building a new model of cooperative relations," including "partnering with each other to ensure that the climate conference achieves its expected targets."

Despite American and Chinese pledges of cooperation, huge hurdles remain before a deal can be reached.

An initial obstacle is that almost 200 countries must reach unanimity before any accord can become legally binding.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he concluded at the end of his talk, "Tackling climate change is a shared mission for all mankind. All eyes are now on Paris. Let us join hands to contribute to the establishment of an equitable and effective global mechanism on climate change, work for global sustainable development at a higher level and bring about new international relations featuring win-win cooperation.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Standing in potential opposition to any agreement is a coalition of developing countries led by India.

Prime Minister Modi argued that it is not right for poor countries to limit economic growth as a solution to the climate problem because they have little responsibility for the creation of this condition. This climate problem, he said, was created by western industrial nations, not poor developing countries.



India is the world's third-largest greenhouse gas polluter. Prime Minister Modi maintains that the less developed nations must have the right to burn carbon to grow their economies, regardless of the short or long term consequences. "Otherwise we can never pull ourselves up out of poverty."

"Climate change is the result of global warming that came from the prosperity and progress of industrial development powered by fossil fuels. Nevertheless, we face its consequences today. We see it in risks of our farmers, changes in weather patterns, and the intensity of natural disasters."

Modi demanded that emissions reductions in India must be paired with billions of dollars of investment from the developed world. Those who have caused this condition must help poor countries make the transition from fossil fuels to cleaner forms of energy.

He also asked, on behalf of India and other developing nations, that developed countries like the U.S. must commit to greater reductions in the amount of greenhouse gases they emit, taking larger responsibility commensurate with the damage done to the environment over decades as they industrialized.

"Your Excellencies, The presence of 196 countries tells us that we have a chance to unite behind a common purpose. We will succeed if we have the wisdom and courage to craft a genuinely collective partnership that balances responsibilities and capabilities with aspirations and needs."

Russian President Vladimir Putin

“Climate change has become one of the gravest challenges humanity is facing,” he said. “Russia will be actively addressing global warming.”

This declaration was a relief to many negotiators. In the past Putin has expressed skepticism about climate change. Russia, as a major petrostate, relies heavily on fossil fuel production, the production of fossil fuels, especially gas.

Over the past month President Putin has held preliminary discussions with German Chancellor Angela Merkel during which he gave assurances that Russian negotiators would not block an agreement if it had the backing of other major countries.

In his statement before the assembled world leaders, President Putin said, “We in Russia have gone beyond the target fixed by the Kyoto Protocol for the period from 1991 to 2012. Russia not only prevented the growth of greenhouse gas emission, but also significantly reduced it,” Putin said.

“Nearly 40 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent weren’t released into the atmosphere. As a comparison, the total emissions of all countries in 2012 reached 46 billion tons.”

Russia is planning to keep progressing by bringing breakthrough technologies into practice, “including nanotechnology,” Putin continued, saying the country is also open to exchange and share the findings.

In addition, Putin has also promised Russia will reduce its polluting emissions by 70 percent by 2030 as compared to base level in 1990.

A new agreement must lay emphasis on the role of forests as major greenhouse gases absorber, Putin said. This would be especially important to Russia with its large forest lands. Preserving the lungs of our planet is a top priority, he added.

Russia is also going to provide financial and other support to developing countries willing to deal with climate change.



At the End of the Day

This first day of this 2015 United Nations Summit on climate change has been one the largest gatherings of world leaders in history. Ahead of them lies the challenge of coming into agreement on how to stave off the worst consequences of global climate change.

Besides the officials from all over the world, the event is expected to get a big lift from prominent business leaders and philanthropists. Some of them are using the talks to announce substantial donations to help the cause of reducing emissions, developing alternative energy sources, conservation, and aiding poor and low-lying countries expected to be most affected by climate change.

"A political moment like this may not come again," declared U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. "We have never before faced such a test. But neither have we encountered such great opportunity."

At the end of the day, the U.S. State Department announced a pledge of \$248 million to help fund the world's least-developed countries move into a future that is less reliant on carbon fuels. This will also help secure their cooperation and support for a final agreement on climate.

It is presumed that President Obama's efforts – as well as his pledges – will meet resistance from republicans in the U.S. Congress. Already congressional republicans are promising to block the president's climate change policies. Because of Senate opposition it is assumed that any climate agreement will not be a binding treaty because that would require the formal support of the Senate. Rather any agreement will need to be a general non-binding document that sets future goals rather than legal commitments.

After today's first round of statements, the seriousness of the day's events began to sink in to delegates and attendees alike. President Francois Hollande opening words seemed ever more pertinent as his message echoes through our minds. "Never before have the stakes been so high because this summit is about the future of the planet, the future of life."