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Brazil Breaks with Emerging Economies to Support Robust Climate Action at U.N. Summit

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Diplomats in Paris reached a global agreement on Dec. 12 that they hope will halt the worst effects of climate change, with Brazil joining a key coalition in the final hours. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held its 21st Conference of Parties (COP 21) in Paris during the first two weeks of December, as momentum grew for a landmark accord that could overcome a 20-year stalemate on the issue.

The participants were unable to meet the original deadline of Dec. 11, so the conference entered overtime, leading to an all-night session that resulted in consensus later the next day. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the negotiations “most complicated, most difficult, but most important for humanity.”

For most of the talks, Brazil was an important player but hardly the strongest voice for comprehensive action. As the largest Latin American country in every measure – population, land area, and economy – Brazil is a potential source of problems and solutions, from growing emissions to carbon sinks. Environment Minister Izabella Teixeira led the delegation, and she was one of 14 ministers handpicked by French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, president of COP 21, to iron out key details heading into the summit’s second week.

Elsewhere at COP 21, Brazilian indigenous groups from the Amazon fought hard for stronger protections. Their main coalition was not pleased with the final deal. Cities, states, and regions, known as “subnationals,” were also a vocal presence at COP 21. Several Brazilian mayors and governors were on hand to showcase local climate leadership from Rio to Palmas.

High ambition

The 196 signatories to the UNFCCC have, over the two decades of UN climate negotiations, divided themselves into negotiating blocs. Heading into COP 21, Brazil was aligned with South Africa, India, and China in a group known as BASIC. As emerging economies that were not responsible for the historically high rates of greenhouse gas emissions that first began to affect the climate, but anticipate increasing their emissions in order to continue growing their economies and raise living standards, these countries are often skeptical of the most ambitious proposals to cut emissions. For example, they steadily resisted calls by the most vulnerable countries to use 1.5 degrees Celsius, instead of 2 degrees Celsius, as the target maximum rise in the global mean temperature.

But in a surprise move on Dec. 11, Brazil announced that it would join a growing group of countries, which ultimately numbered over 100, in the “High Ambition Coalition.” Orchestrated by the Marshall Islands, one of the countries most at risk in climate change scenarios because of sea level rise, the coalition came together behind the stronger provisions in the final draft text, which Fabius delivered on the morning of Dec. 12.
Teixeira said that Brazil was committed to “a fair, balanced, ambitious and long-lasting agreement.” She added, “If you want to tackle climate change, you need ambition and political will. Brazil proudly supports the High Ambition Coalition.”

The move was viewed as a diplomatic coup, given that Brazil’s colleagues in its former coalition, India and China, were seen as potentially major obstacles to an impactful climate deal. World leaders courted these large developing economies, with US President Barack Obama making a personal call to Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff on Dec. 7.

On Dec. 12, following the adoption of the Paris Agreement, the Brazilian delegation released a statement on behalf of Teixeira. “Today we’ve proven that it’s possible for every country to come together, hand in hand, to do its part to fight climate change. The Paris Agreement will have a positive and lasting impact for generations to come. This is a win for humanity,” it read.

The Brazilian delegation also acknowledged its historic role in climate change talks, dating back to the 1992 UN Earth Summit, formally known as the UN Conference on Environment and Development, which took place in Rio de Janeiro (NotiSur, June 9, 1992, and July 2, 1992). “Brazil has worked tirelessly to ensure that this agreement finds the right balance between mitigation and adaptation, promotes transparency, ensures the progression of ambition levels, and most importantly, reflects the common but differentiated responsibility shared by the global community to effectively combat climate change,” the statement also read.

**Hand-picked 14**

The High Ambition Coalition was not the only moment where Brazil took center stage at the climate talks. Going into the conference, negotiators had spent months preparing a draft text that was riddled with over 900 brackets, a punctuation mark that in diplomatic documents means “to be determined.” On Dec. 5, with COP 21 at the midway point and the draft text still mostly composed of brackets, Fabius called on 14 ministers to pair off and make headway to deliver a more streamlined agreement.

Brazil’s Teixeira was paired with Singapore’s Vivian Balakrishnan to work on the theme of “differentiation,” or the differing responsibilities between developed and developing countries. This topic had been one of the major sticking points, with developed economies demanding that developing economies halt their emissions, while in response developing economies complain that developed economies had the chance to reap the benefits of growth through cheap energy.

As representatives of one of only a dozen countries that have full diplomatic relations with every UN member state, Brazilian diplomats are often called on for such tasks. Evaluating Brazil’s stance at the midway points in the talks, Greenpeace Brasil’s Pedro Telles said, “Brazil is well recognized for the capacity of its diplomats, their ability to mediate and facilitate. Without a doubt, it will play an important role.”

Indeed, heading into COP 21, Brazil showed signs that it would break with the hardline stance of developing countries. In September, when it submitted its voluntary emissions reductions plan, it became the first developing country to offer an eventual absolute emissions cut, rather than indexing such cuts to forecasted growth. The country offered cuts of greenhouse gases of 37% against 2005 levels by 2025, stronger enforcement against deforestation in the Amazon (NotiSur, Feb. 17, 2006), replanting significant areas that have been clear-cut, and a concerted effort to switch to
renewable energy (NotiSur, Nov. 20, 2009). All told, the plan would bring Brazil’s emissions down to 1990 levels by 2030.

Upon the plan’s announcement, Rousseff said, “Our goals are just as ambitious, if not more so, than those set by developed countries.” However, Brazilian environmental activists were not necessarily convinced. “What Brazil is putting on the table doesn’t represent a real shift in our economy. There is no revolution in any sector,” said Carlos Rittl of the Brazilian Climate Observatory, an umbrella group of NGOs.

From mayors to chiefs

The Brazilian presence elsewhere at COP 21 took diverse form, showcasing the country’s engagement with climate issues outside of the national delegation. Rio de Janeiro Mayor Eduardo Paes was a strong voice on behalf of cities as president of the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, a network of 82 cities representing 600 million people. C40 released groundbreaking research during COP 21 on the role of cities in combating climate change, arguing that local leaders are poised to act more quickly than their national counterparts.

“The road from COP21 is now clear because we understand very concretely the further action cities can take to make a global impact in tackling climate change,” Paes said in a statement during the conference. “The leadership of cities is unequivocal, but there is no question that barriers remain, the most significant being access to finance and a need for greater governmental coordination.” For their part, Carlos Amastha, the mayor of Palmas, the capital of Tocantins, and José Melo de Oliveira, the governor of Amazonas, spoke on the sidelines of the official negotiations.

On Dec. 7, two Brazilian groups were among several honored by the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP’s) Equator Prize to acknowledge indigenous perseverance in the face of climate change. The Movimento Ipereg Ayu and Instituto Raoni were among the honorees from 19 countries representing indigenous groups from Central and South America, as well as Central and Southeast Asia.

The Movimento Ipereg Ayu was honored for its fight against a proposed dam along the Tapajós River in the Brazilian Amazon that would submerge one million hectares of rainforest that the Munduruku people rely on as hunting and fishing grounds. The proposal prompted the 13,000 Munduruku to organize politically and demarcate their lands in negotiations with the federal government. The outcome was a landmark protocol on the right to free, prior, and informed consent.

For the Instituto Raoni, an organization of Kayapó indigenous people, video is the weapon to fight illegal logging. Their documentation of abuses has resulted in the protection of 2.5 million hectares of indigenous lands for the Kapotnhinore, Panará, Yudja, Trumáí and Tapayuna peoples. “Our winners tonight are an inspiration,” said UNDP Administrator Helen Clark. “Climate change affects all of us – rich and poor, developed and developing, urban and local. It is truly an all-of-society concern that requires an equally all-of-society approach. The people and groups here tonight have shown that action and innovation against climate change can and does happen at all levels, and this should be encouraged, supported and scaled up.”

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