

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on the Declaration by the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate Change in L'Aquila, Italy

July 9, 2009

Buona sera. Good afternoon. We have just finished a productive meeting of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate Change, and I'd like to begin by recognizing Prime Minister Berlusconi for cochairing this forum, as well as the extraordinary hospitality that he, his team, and the people of L'Aquila and the people of Italy have shown us during this stay. We are very grateful to all of you. I also want to thank the 17 other leaders who participated.

We had a candid and open discussion about the growing threat of climate change and what our nations must do, both individually and collectively, to address it. And while we don't expect to solve this problem in one meeting or one summit, I believe we've made some important strides forward as we move towards Copenhagen.

I don't think I have to emphasize that climate change is one of the defining challenges of our time. The science is clear and conclusive, and the impacts can no longer be ignored. Ice sheets are melting; sea levels are rising; our oceans are becoming more acidic. And we've already seen its effects on weather patterns, our food and water sources, our health and our habitats.

Every nation on this planet is at risk, and just as no one nation is responsible for climate change, no one nation can address it alone. And that's why, back in April, I convened this forum of the world's major economies who are responsible for more than three-quarters of the world's carbon pollution. And it's why we've gathered again here today.

Each of our nations comes to the table with different needs, different priorities, different levels of development. And developing nations have real and understandable concerns about the role they will play in these efforts. They want to make sure that they do not have to sacrifice their aspirations for development and higher living standards. Yet, with most of the growth in projected emissions coming from these countries, their active participation is a prerequisite for a solution.

We also agree that developed countries, like my own, have a historic responsibility to take the lead. We have the much larger carbon footprint per capita, and I know that in the past, the United States has sometimes fallen short of meeting our responsibilities. So let me be clear: Those days are over. One of my highest priorities as President is to drive a clean energy transformation of our economy, and over the past 6 months, the United States has taken steps towards this goal.

We've made historic investments in the billions of dollars in developing clean energy technologies. We're on track to create thousands of new jobs across America—on solar initiatives and wind projects and biofuel projects, trying to show that there is no contradiction between environmentally sustainable growth and robust economic growth.

We've also for the first time created a national policy raising our fuel efficiency standards that will result in savings of 1.8 billion barrels of oil over the lifetime of vehicles sold in the next 5 years alone. And we just passed in our House of Representatives the first climate change legislation that would cut carbon pollution by more than 80 percent by 2050.

These are very significant steps in the United States. They're not as far as some countries have gone, but they are further than others, and I think that as I wrestle with these issues politically in my own country, I've come to see that it is going to be absolutely critical that all of us go beyond what's expected if we're going to achieve our goals. During the course of our 3 days in L'Aquila, we've taken also a number of significant steps forward. I want to briefly highlight them.

This week, the G-8 nations came to a historic consensus on concrete goals for reducing carbon emissions. We all agreed that by 2050 developed nations will reduce their emissions by 80 percent, and that we will work with all nations to cut global emissions in half. This ambitious effort is consistent with limiting global warming to no more than 2 degrees Celsius, which, as our declaration explicitly acknowledged for the first time, is what the mainstream of the scientific community has called for.

Today at the Major Economies Forum, developed and developing nations made further and unprecedented commitments to take strong and prompt action. Developed nations committed to reducing their emissions in absolute terms. And for the first time, developing nations also acknowledged the significance of the 2 degrees Celsius metric and agreed to take action to meaningfully lower their emissions relative to business as usual in the midterm—in the next decade or so. And they agreed that between now and Copenhagen, they will negotiate concrete goals to reduce their emissions by 2050.

We also agreed that the actions we take to achieve our reductions must be measurable, reportable, and verifiable. And we agreed to establish, at the earliest possible date, a peak year after which overall global emissions will start falling. And these are all very significant steps forward in addressing this challenge.

In addition, we agreed to substantially increase financial resources to help developing nations create low-carbon growth plans and deploy clean energy technologies. We also recognize that climate change is already happening, and so we're going to have to help those affected countries adapt, particularly those who are least able to deal with its consequences because of a lack of resources. So we are looking at providing significant financial assistance to help these countries, and I want to particularly commend President Calderon of Mexico and Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom for coming up with some creative proposals that all of us are going to be exploring as to how we might finance this. We've asked the G-20 finance ministers to take up the climate financing issues and report back to us at the G-20 meeting in Pittsburgh in the fall.

Finally, we've agreed to create a new global partnership to drive the development of transformational clean energy technologies around the world. Our goal is to double the research and development investments we need to bring these technologies to market and to achieve our long-term energy and emissions goals. A number of countries have already agreed to take lead on developing particular technologies, including solar and smart grids, advanced vehicles, bio-energy, and more. Australia, for example, is creating a new center, which Kevin will be introducing shortly, and, I think, points to the ability for us to pool our resources in order to see the technological breakthroughs that are going to be necessary in order for us to solve this problem.

So let me just summarize. We've made a good start, but I am the first one to acknowledge that progress on this issue will not be easy. And I think that one of the things we're going to have to do is fight the temptation towards cynicism, to feel that the problem is so immense that somehow we cannot make significant strides.

It is no small task for 17 leaders to bridge their differences on an issue like climate change. We each have our national priorities and politics to contend with, and any steps we agree to here are intended to support and not replace the main U.N. negotiations with more than 190 countries. It's even more difficult in the context of a global recession, which I think adds to the fears that somehow addressing this issue will contradict the possibilities of robust global economic growth.

But ultimately, we have a choice. We can either shape our future, or we can let events shape it for us. We can fall back on the stale debates and old divisions, or we can decide to move forward and meet this challenge together. I think it's clear from our progress today which path is preferable and which path we have chosen. We know that the problems we face are made by human beings. That means it's within our capacity to solve them. The question is whether we will have the will to do so; whether we'll summon the courage and exercise the leadership to chart a new course. That's the responsibility of our generation; that must be our legacy for generations to come. And I am looking forward to being a strong partner in this effort.

With that, let me turn it over to Kevin Rudd, who, I think, has a significant announcement that fits in with the issues I raised earlier about technology challenges and our capacity to move forward and leapfrog over some of the old technologies that make this problem so difficult to deal with.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:41 p.m. in the G–8 press conference room at the Guardia di Finanza Inspectors' School. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy; Prime Minister Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom; and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd of Australia.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Italy :: Declaration by the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate in L'Aquila.

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