



Punctuation Heats Up Climate Talks With 'Famous Comma' Debate

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By Alex Morales and Kim Chipman

Dec. 18 (Bloomberg) -- One contentious comma inserted two years ago into the United Nations road map for a new deal to fight global warming is again causing squabbles among delegates from the 193 nations in Copenhagen devising the pact.

The comma was inserted on the first page, section 1 b (ii), of the so-called **Bali Action Plan** at the meeting on the Indonesian island in 2007 at the insistence of the U.S. It caused a debate that ran for two hours as the punctuation mark left open to interpretation the responsibilities of rich and poor nations to cut greenhouse-gas emissions.

"The famous comma! It allowed both sides to read the text the way they wanted to," said **Jennifer Havercamp**, managing director of policy and negotiations at the Washington-based **Environmental Defense Fund**. Havercamp was in the room during the punctuation debate in Bali.

The Bali Action Plan set parameters for two weeks of talks in Copenhagen that should conclude today when U.S. President **Barack Obama** joins Chinese Premier **Wen Jiabao** and more than 100 other world leaders in the Danish capital. They will take over the debate from envoys who have bickered and walked out over provisions for a climate deal since the talks started Dec. 7.

Issues dividing delegates include the size of cuts in greenhouse gases by developed nations, verifying emission reductions by developing countries, and possible climate aid worth \$100 billion a year from richer to poorer nations.

The Bali Comma

The Bali paragraph says treaty talks should yield "nationally appropriate" actions by developing countries to curb emissions "in the context of sustainable development, supported and enabled by technology, financing and capacity- building, in a measurable, reportable and verifiable manner."

The comma after "building" was dropped and then reinserted at the Bush administration's insistence.

Delegates from the U.S. argued for the comma to be inserted so that "actions" by developing countries and not just support from industrialized nations, would be measurable, reportable and verifiable, or MRV in UN jargon.

"It took almost two hours to debate the comma," **Quamrul Chowdhury**, a Bangladeshi envoy who's negotiated climate issues since before the Rio Earth summit in 1992, said in an interview in Copenhagen. "One comma creates a lot of trouble."

Even with the comma, the clause is still argued over.

The U.S. considers the Bali plan clear in saying that all emissions-reducing actions by developing nations should be subject to MRV, not just those that receive financing, according to a senior Obama administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Devil in the Details

"That is definitely not what the Bali Action Plan provided for," China's climate-change ambassador, **Yu Qingtai**, said in an interview in Copenhagen. Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao said "the language contained in the action plan is the result of long years of negotiation," Vice Foreign Minister **He Yafei** told reporters.

Mexican Environment Minister **Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada** agrees with China.

"The actions we take, for example the capture of methane from a garbage dump, can be measurable, reportable and verifiable for international purposes if they're going to give us financing," Elvira said in an interview. "They can't impose MRV on my developing country if they're not giving us any aid."

Such details can disrupt UN treaty-making. Text on deforestation was held up for years over whether to use the plural "indigenous peoples," said **Andrew Deutz**, director of international government relations at the Nature Conservancy, an environmental advocacy group in Arlington, Virginia.

The U.S. has a history of opposing references to the rights of "peoples" because of the impact it could have on U.S. domestic law and the rights of American Indians, Deutz said.

Tale of Two Treaties

Senator **John Kerry**, a Massachusetts Democrat who traveled this week to Copenhagen to push for an agreement, said in an interview that when it comes to what the U.S. wants from China, verification is the "single most important ingredient."

The Senate's view of China is crucial because it is the only U.S. body authorized to approve treaties. The chamber rejected the current Kyoto Protocol in 1998 because it required richer nations to cut carbon-dioxide pollution from factories, power plants and other sources, yet not China and other major developing countries.

"The comma is a manifestation of a massive area of disagreement still among the parties," Havercamp of the Environmental Defense Fund said.

As delegates struggled to agree on one treaty, they also discussed having two instead. With host country Denmark trying to break an impasse in the talks this week, envoys were at one point considering four drafts of potential treaties.

Verbs, Modifiers

Envoys "lost a lot of negotiating time" as they debated whether to work on two texts proposed by Denmark, or continue to debate the UN's two official texts, **Selwin Hart**, a Barbadian delegate who speaks for 43 island and low-lying states, said in a telephone interview.

"We're prepared to work throughout the night to get a deal," Hart said. U.K. Prime Minister **Gordon Brown** yesterday told reporters that leaders also are prepared to work through the night to word an agreement appropriately.

"There are discussions on what the final treaty will say about transparency, reporting and monitoring," Brown said. "It's possible to see a way forward but obviously these are ambitions that have got to be reflected in language that could go into a treaty."

Even U.S. Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton** didn't escape questions on word usage when she held a news conference yesterday in Copenhagen.

Asked about the proposed climate treaty text, she noted that officials at her level are spared the headache of agonizing over every word in the negotiations.

"The advantage of being secretary of state is I'm up here at the large macro-level and they (negotiators) have to get down into the nitty gritty and determine exactly what verb and modifier needs to be used."

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