China Says Rich Countries Should Take Lead on Global Warming

By JIM YARDLEY

China said Tuesday that wealthier countries must take the lead in curbing greenhouse gas emissions and refused to say whether it would agree to any mandatory emissions limits that might hamper its booming economy.

Jiang Yu, a spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry, said China was willing to contribute to an international effort to combat global warming but placed the primary responsibility on richer, developed nations that have been polluting for much longer.

"It must be pointed out that climate change has been caused by the long-term historic emissions of developed countries and their high per capita emissions," she said, adding that developed countries have responsibilities for global warming "that cannot be shirked."

Ms. Jiang's comments, combined with another briefing on Tuesday by the country's leading climate expert, represented China's first official response to a landmark report issued last week by a United Nations panel of scientists that declared global warming is "unequivocal" and warned that immediate action must be taken to prevent harmful consequences.

China is the world's second largest emitter of the greenhouse gases contributing to climate change, trailing only the United States. Last November, the International Energy Agency in Paris predicted that China would pass the United States in emissions of carbon dioxide in 2009. China had been expected to surpass the United States as late as 2020, but its soaring consumption of coal has rapidly increased the country's emissions.

China derives nearly 70 percent of its energy from coal-fired power plants, many of them equipped with substandard pollution controls.

Chinese officials have long noted that China's per capita emissions remain well below the averages in wealthier countries, including the United States. Officials also argue that China remains a developing country without the financial resources or technological prowess to make a rapid shift to cleaner, more expensive energy technology.

China has not disputed the scientific rationale behind global warming or denied the potential harm it could cause. Later this year, China is expected to release broad policy goals on how it can reduce emissions and respond to global warming. In December, it issued a report warning that climate change posed a serious threat to the country's agricultural output and economy.

"The Chinese government is taking climate change extremely seriously," Qin Dahe, chief of the China Meteorological Administration, told reporters at the briefing. "President Hu Jintao has said that climate change is not just an environmental issue but also a development issue, ultimately a development issue."

Indeed, even if Chinese leaders acknowledge the problem, they remain resistant to any sweeping measures that could threaten the country's development. Some efforts are already meeting with uneven results.

Mr. Qin, who served as a co-chairman of the United Nations panel that issued the global warming report last week, noted that China had set an ambitious five-year goal of improving energy efficiency by 20 percent. But last year, the country failed to meet the initial target in that schedule.

China's standing as both a huge developing country and as one of the world's fastest-growing economies has given it prominence in the global warming debate. Along with India, China is exempt from the requirements of the Kyoto Protocol, the agreement that calls on industrial nations to reduce emissions by 2012. (The United States signed the agreement, but has not ratified it.)

As a developing country that's growing rapidly and has a big population, to thoroughly transform the energy structure and use clean energy would need a lot of money," Mr. Qin said, according to Reuters.

Ms. Jiang, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said China recently ordered a shutdown of dirtier coal-fired power plants that emitted 5.4 million tons of sulfur dioxide a year.

Meanwhile, China has been experiencing record warm temperatures this winter that scientists attribute at least partly to global warming. Temperatures in Beijing have soared into the 50s in February, a month when the historical average is just below freezing.
Brazil's Leader Speaks Out

RIO DE JANEIRO, Feb. 6 (Reuters) -- The president of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, said Tuesday that wealthy countries were responsible for global warming and that they should stop telling Brazil what to do with the Amazon rain forest.

"The wealthy countries are very smart, approving protocols, holding big speeches on the need to avoid deforestation, but they already deforested everything," Mr. da Silva said during the announcement of a public works project in Rio de Janeiro.

Mr. da Silva, a former factory worker, said wealthy countries should switch to nonfossil fuels, such as ethanol or biodiesel, an area where Brazil is a pioneer.

Brazil is the world's largest producer of ethanol, which they derive from sugar cane.