Next climate treaty ‘should be tiered’

Yaacob Ibrahim: Allow for common but differentiated responsibilities

BY NEO HUI MIN

THE next international treaty on climate change should be a tiered one, allowing countries to have common but differentiated responsibilities, said Environment and Water Resources Minister Yaacob Ibrahim.

Speaking to The Straits Times after a two-day meeting of Asian and European environment ministers here, Dr Yaacob noted that further dialogue would be important to identify common ground among countries in order to move towards an agreement before the current Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012.

“We must recognise that we cannot have a one-size-fits-all solution. The idea of common but differentiated responsibilities is very important,” he said.

The Kyoto Protocol international treaty to combat climate change has a similar approach. Industrialised countries in the so-called Annex 1 committed to an overall carbon emissions cut of 5 per cent from their 1990 levels by 2012.

Non-Annex 1 countries such as Singapore do not have binding emission-reduction targets.

The issue of binding targets has been the main reason countries, especially rapidly industrialising nations, are reluctant to join Kyoto as they do not want to sacrifice economic growth to meet emission-cut targets.

Ministers at the Asia-Europe meeting pledged on Wednesday to strengthen cooperation to fight climate change, but did not commit to a deadline for a new global treaty to replace Kyoto.

Dr Yaacob noted that issues such as the transfer of technology to help developing nations grow in a sustainable manner could be the common ground that would help to get more countries on board.

“To find the common ground, let’s talk about technology transfer, efficient means, how do we do it, and the market mechanisms. Let people have a clearer picture, then we can convince the countries,” he said.

He suggested that countries could also look at setting their own targets for the adoption of renewable energy sources.

And if developed nations provide the technology as well as the necessary funding, there would be little reason for developing nations not to adopt the technology, he noted.

Singapore too could play a role by hosting a technology-transfer workshop, which was floated by participants at the meeting, said Dr Yaacob.

The role of a facilitator of discussion to foster greater understanding is one that Singapore could play in the international climate change debate.

Reacting to suggestions, including from the World Wildlife Fund’s director for the Global Climate Change Programme, Mr Hans Verolme, that Singapore should move up to the group of Annex 1 countries, Dr Yaacob made his position clear.

Singapore is a small island state and highly dependent on fossil fuels, he noted, and while there is sun to harvest solar energy, the intensity is “not that great”. All these factors make it difficult for Singapore to move into Annex 1.

“Singapore will continue to do our part. Let’s appreciate the different contexts and see what we can do within our context - driving the economy and sustaining the environment,” Dr Yaacob said.

Rather than a carbon emissions cut, Singapore has set a target to cut its carbon intensity - carbon dioxide emissions per GDP dollar - by 25 per cent by 2012 compared to its 1990 levels.

Other measures include a climate change awareness programme and looking at the energy consumption patterns of various industries in order to reduce redundancies.

The government has also poured in $250 million to grow Singapore into a clean technology hub.

“Whatever we learn or develop, whether in clean technology or renewables, we are happy to share,” Dr Yaacob said.

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