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UN officials' call to keep carbon on the agenda

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The two UN officials leading the fight against climate change yesterday warned that fears of an economic downturn could put efforts to cut carbon emissions at risk.

Speaking on the first day of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Rajendra Pachauri, the chairman of the intergovernmental panel on climate change, said he was concerned that world leaders would be "distracted" by the short-term search for jobs and economic growth. He called on them "not to lose sight of the reality of climate change" and he said that it would "clearly be very unfortunate" if stockmarket instability threatened progress made so far.

His comments were echoed by Yvo de Boer, who chaired last year's Bali climate change conference. He told the Guardian that "this is the time to really be bold and push through".

"The reality is that people are going to suffer pain and others are going to gain," he said.

"I don't think any self-respecting European politician can leave his or her house if Europe backs off the commitment to cut emissions by 20%. I don't think they can be driven away from the commitment they made in Bali."

De Boer called for "a Marshall plan for climate change". "Gordon Brown like every other politician has to do a political balancing act of being involved but not digging their own political graves," he said.

Pachauri attacked yesterday's EU plans on making emission cuts of 20% by 2020. "What has come out is not up to expectations," he said. "What seems acceptable at this point may not seem acceptable in three or four years' time."

He was referring to yesterday's announcement in Brussels by the European commission that committed the bloc to cutting its carbon dioxide emissions by 20% and deriving 20% of its total energy needs from renewable energy by 2020.

Britain, which lags behind almost all its EU partners in deriving only 2% of its energy from renewable sources, was told by the commission it would have to increase that proportion to 15%.

The Guardian was handed leaked documents last year showing that officials at the Department for Enterprise, Business and Regulatory Reform were advising ministers that Britain had no hope of achieving the EU target and advising them to find ways to wriggle out of it.

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The business secretary, John Hutton, said the government was already carrying out a major review of its climate change strategy and was committed to meeting its EU targets. But he said the figure to which Britain was committed would be set in negotiations between ministers based on the commission proposals.

"Whatever the final outcome, the UK is already exploring a vast expansion of wind energy offshore and tidal power on the Severn, and we are already thoroughly reviewing our strategy to drive progress further."

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