

Speech by Member of the European Commission Ritt Bjerregaard at
the First Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention
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Madame President, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen

The question is simple: Are we willing or are we not willing to save our global climate? The world is watching us. It is expecting an answer. Are we willing or are we not willing to act? That is the question we have to answer, not only for us - the nations of today, but for the nations of tomorrow. Future generations, who would have to live with the consequences of our indecisiveness.

Temperatures are rising. The sea levels are rising. Island countries are in danger of disappearing. Desertification threatens larger and larger areas of the planet. How much longer can we meet and just discuss the problems? How many tons of CO₂ do we need to pump into the atmosphere before we realise that this problem is real? How many complicated agreements, protocols, scientific and technical reports do we need before we wake up?

Gro Harlem Brundtland spelled out the problems already eight years ago. In Rio we made the first commitments three years ago. Some efforts have been made - but, let us be honest and let us face reality - we are far, far from achieving our global targets. Now we need to keep up the momentum.

Firstly, we must recommit ourselves to stabilisation of greenhouse gas emissions at a level that will prevent interference with the climate system.

Secondly, we have to open our eyes and look towards the future. We must be willing to commit ourselves to targets that go beyond the year 2000.

The EU has been working. It is making a concerted effort to reduce CO₂ emissions. The Commission's Working Paper on the EU Climate Change Strategy confirmed the EU's commitment to achieve its stabilisation targets. At the same time, it identifies a set of options showing that there is cost-effective technical potential for reductions of emissions of up to 10% in the period 2005 - 2010. At the Council meeting in March, the Ministers reconfirmed their commitment to the stabilisation targets and agreed to work towards further reductions beyond year 2000.

It is neither technical nor economic constraints that will prevent us from reaching our goals. We have the tools. The real challenge is to find the political will. The industrialised countries have a particular responsibility. They must lead the way and show that they are willing to commit and to act.

This, however, does not diminish the role of the developing countries. We all recognise the need for the developing countries to secure steadily increasing economic growth. But in this context, the developing countries have an important contribution to make by realising this growth in a sustainable way. Whereever possible, the industrialised countries should assist the developing countries in restraining the increase of greenhouse gas emissions by transfer of appropriate technology and by provision of financial resources.

We are here to reach an important agreement. Negotiations have been difficult. I therefore welcome the initiative taken by a broad group of developing countries - representing half of the world's population - as a breakthrough in these negotiations. This initiative is in line with the basic philosophy of the Commission's Options paper.

We are about to take an important step forward. We are looking beyond the short term, towards a firm commitment to specific and binding reduction targets. Will we succeed ? I urge the OECD countries to live up to their responsibility and to make it possible for all nations to reach an agreement on this basis. There have been many obstacles on the way. We now need that last bit of political courage that will make this conference a success. A common commitment to our global climate - a mandate for positive progress- that will motivate people in all nations to work for real and specific results.

Let me conclude by thanking the Federal Government in general and you, Madam President Frau Angela Merkel, in particular for all the efforts which have gone into the preparations of this conference and for the hospitality you are showing us here in Berlin.

Madam President, the symbolism of the city of Berlin is stronger than ever. Berlin stands out in European history in the twentieth century. Now we have the chance to link the name of Berlin to the most important political question for the next hundred years: a better global environment. Let us tear down another wall in Berlin !

Thank you.