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Lagos: Climate change is 'most pressing issue'

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The international community must unite to address the threat of global warming, former Chilean President Ricardo Lagos told a full Joukowsky Forum at the Watson Institute for International Studies Wednesday night.

"This is the most pressing issue for the survival of our planet," Lagos said, and the first time the world has faced a problem that truly "recognizes no political frontiers."

Lagos, a professor-at-large at Watson, is a U.N. special envoy for climate change and president of the Club of Madrid, a confederation of 70 former heads of state. As president of the club, Lagos established Global Leadership for Climate Action, a partnership with the U.N. that has outlined recommendations to help limit the increase in Earth's temperature to between 2 and 2.5 degrees by 2050.

The Earth's temperature, Lagos said, could rise by up to 4 degrees in the next century "if we keep business as usual."

"Nothing is going to happen to me because of my age," Lagos said, "neither to you." But he added that "mankind is going to suffer a lot" in future generations if the trend of global warming continues.

Beyond the ethical obligations to fight climate change, Lagos said it makes economic sense to tackle the problem before it escalates.

"The cost of not doing (anything) is going to be much greater than the cost of doing something," he said.

Lagos offered several concrete suggestions for how nations could collaborate to reverse the trend of climate change. For example, he said countries could make commitments to preserve forests and thereby reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Other nations could turn national commitments about energy use into internationally accountable agreements, he said.

Much of Lagos' speech focused on how the world will address global warming after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. That agreement, an international treaty to limit greenhouse gas emissions, was signed in 1997. Lagos said the U.S. - the only developed nation never to ratify the treaty - must play an active role in the future.

Noting that accumulation of greenhouses gases in the atmosphere over the past 120 years has caused temperatures to rise, Lagos said the U.S. bears some "historical responsibility" for the current crisis for having been a leader in the Industrial Revolution. He added that the U.S. emits more greenhouse gases per capita than any other nation - though China now produces more overall.

The U.S., Lagos said, has the potential to provide "global leadership for climate action" in the future. Quoting former President Bill Clinton, a fellow member of the Club of Madrid, Lagos said America must show the world "the power of example, not the example of power."

But Lagos also acknowledged the complexities of fighting global warming on an international scale. For example, he said nations would have a hard time agreeing on how to split the estimated annual \$50 billion cost of an effective international campaign against global warming. He added that new technologies developed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and conserve energy might not be widely shared among countries because of international copyright laws.

Though his speech focused on the international challenge of global warming, Lagos also emphasized the role individuals would play in the fight against climate change. Specifically, he said there would be a blurring of "frontiers between suppliers and consumers of energy" as people produce more of their own energy through renewable resources such as wind and solar power.

The stakes are high, Lagos said, and he told the audience that one thing is certain. "We are approaching a world," he said, "that is going to be very different from the world we know today."

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