

Special post by Nina Jarass, UCLA School of Law LLM student, from Durban

So far the US has kept pretty quiet in Durban – at least during the official meetings. Against this background, environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council have urged the Obama administration to show more flexibility on key issues surrounding the survival of the Kyoto Protocol and efforts to craft a new global climate agreement. On Tuesday Jonathan Pershing, the Deputy Special Envoy for Climate Change and Head of the US Delegation in Durban, offered some insight on the US position.

In a briefing with youth groups, Pershing made it quite clear that the U.S. has no intention to agree to any legally binding commitments before 2020. Pershing argued that the commitments that are already on the table are good enough. Instead of agreeing to further commitments in Durban, countries should advance voluntary national programs. Pershing left open why he believes that there will be a comprehensive ambition to reduce emissions (even further) in 2020 if countries cannot agree on urgently needed actions to fight the impacts of global warming now.

While numerous countries have emphasized the importance of the U.S. getting back at the negotiation table and taking a step forward, Pershing referred to other countries' unwillingness to update their commitments as a reason for the U.S. reservation. Additionally, he referred to the U.S. reduction target of 17% below 2005 levels, arguing that this is a rather ambitious commitment (comparing it to the EU reduction targets). However, Pershing did not mention that the U.S. target is not legally binding.

Given his background as a director of the non-partisan Climate, Energy and Pollution Program at the World Resources Institute (WRI), it was surprising that Pershing did not share most scientists' opinion that immediate action with regard to climate change is necessary. Pershing finished the briefing by emphasizing the role of young people in the U.S. and the necessity for them to communicate their ideas and hopes for a greener future. However, as of now it does not seem like the U.S. government is actually willing to make adequate contributions to a greener future. With the U.S. remaining passive, getting other major emitting countries, like China or India, to agree to legally binding emissions reduction targets will become even more difficult.