



The G8 summit in Hokkaido

They came, they jawed, they failed to conquer

HOKKAIDO

A mountain-top gabfest provided a spectacular show and a long guest list but few answers to the woes of the world

AS DILIGENT hosts, the Japanese made sure this year's G8 summit, grouping the leaders of the biggest industrial economies plus Russia, saw little of the angry protest that has marred so many similar gatherings. It all happened at a remote highland resort at Toyako on Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. Many foreign activists were turned away at the border, and such demonstrations as did take place were kept to distant cities where riot police outnumbered malcontents. Even the media horde and those non-government organisations (NGOs) deemed semi-respectable were interned in a holiday camp about 20 miles from the eight great leaders.

To Yasuo Fukuda, Japan's prime minister, whose domestic standing is extremely shaky, the summit's smooth passage was a huge relief. He even showed a flash of statesmanship. In answer to perennial criticism that the G8, a self-appointed steering group for global problems, was hardly representative of the world, he invited seven national leaders from Africa to join Japan, the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia to discuss the continent's development.

At another point, Russia's Dmitry Medvedev found himself hobnobbing not only with the old-time capitalist club but also with fellow leaders (see picture) of the BRIG gang of fast-growing giants—in other words, his counterparts from Brazil, India and China. By inviting that lot, plus Mexi-

co, South Africa, Indonesia, South Korea and Australia, the Japanese were able to bring together the bulk of the world's greenhouse-gas emitters. This was easily the G8's biggest "outreach" to date, and Mr Fukuda skillfully ensured that disagreements among that disparate bunch did not break out angrily into the open. Carry on like that, people at the summit quipped, and the 71-year-old leader might one day make a competent foreign minister.

On substance, however, the summit was a let-down. A year ago, when the Heiligendamm summit took place in Germany, oil and food staples were at half their prices today, while Northern Rock was an unknown little bank. At the Toyko summit the G8 leaders rose to the challenges posed by the "three Fs"—food, fuel and the financial credit crunch—with platitudes, and little effort was made to resolve the contradiction between calls for larger oil supplies and the promise of a low-carbon future.

On Africa, higher food prices seemed to make a mockery of G8 pledges made three years ago to raise annual aid levels by \$25 billion until 2010, even before NGOs warned that the commitment was already slipping. (Here, though, Japan can hold its head higher: in May it hosted a big African aid gathering, promising substantially to increase aid and technology transfer.)

The big disappointment was over climate change—despite some word games. Last year, Germany's chancellor, Angela

Merkel, overcame the reluctance of George Bush and got the G8 to promise to "consider seriously" cutting greenhouse emissions by at least half by 2050. This time the G8 vowed to "consider and adopt" such cuts. Ms Merkel hailed this tighter language; the hosts called it the summit's biggest victory, coming just 18 months before 180 countries meet in Copenhagen to hammer out a successor to the Kyoto protocol. In effect, Mr Bush has at last committed America to a quantifiable target. With just 200-odd days of his presidency to run, this may be his final input to the climate-change debate; some would call it his only contribution.

Yet the strength of the G8's commitment starts to crumble under scrutiny—even without one cynical Russian diplomat pointing out how absurd it is for today's politicians to take responsibility for meeting goals four decades from now. The baseline from which the cuts are supposed to occur has been left vague. The European Union wants them to begin from 1990, while Japan (which unilaterally says it will aim for a 60-80% cut in emissions) thinks it more realistic to start from 2005 or perhaps this year. America hardly has an opinion.

To some, this obsession with distant targets is beside the point. The G8 could not come up even with nearer-term goals to cut emissions—say, by 2020. The lack of more immediate and concrete measures, says Michael Grubb of the Carbon Trust, set up by the British government to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, underscores an "abdication of responsibility". At the least, he says, the G8 leaders could have promised to treat cuts eventually agreed under UN auspices as legally binding. And they could have moved to bring the huge, dirty market in bunker fuel for shipping and aviation, hitherto excluded from discussion of caps, into the negotiations.

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> Without such marks of resolve, it is little wonder that the five biggest developing polluters, which account for a smallish amount of the man-made carbon dioxide now clogging the air but a fast increasing share of new emissions, refused to make any firm pledges. A Japanese diplomat worries that the relationship between the G8 and the so-called G5 (India, China, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa) over climate change may soon resemble management-and-labour stand-offs at their worst.

Perhaps such weakness was inevitable. Big challenges demand strong leaders. But if Mr Fukuda is weak domestically, Mr Brown looks little better. Mr Bush is a lame, unpopular duck. Nicolas Sarkozy of France struggles to comprehend how and why his voters' enthusiasm has evaporated. In all the big democracies (as well as elsewhere) the three Fs have played their part in creating a mood of dissatisfaction. Leaders find themselves punished, and also hobbled, by the low regard in which they are held by their voters. •