

‘Seal the deal’ battlecry to secure legacy

By Harvey Morris

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Posted around United Nations headquarters are photographs of Ban Ki-moon on a visit to Antarctica bearing the slogan “Seal the Deal”, an exhortation to negotiators to reach an agreement on climate change at Copenhagen.

Since taking up the leadership of the UN in 2007, the secretary-general has made global warming his number one priority and attempted to keep the issue on the agenda amid the immediate preoccupations of member states.

With officials scaling back expectations of a final agreement at Copenhagen, the “Seal the Deal” slogan may turn out to be a hostage to fortune, at least in the short run. Progress or lack of it would illustrate the truism that the UN can only move at the pace of its membership.

Mr Ban can be a cheerleader for action on an issue he regards as the most serious challenge facing the world, and the UN can provide a forum for tackling it, but in the end it is a matter for states to find a formula on carbon emissions on which they can agree.

Within those limitations, however, Mr Ban is credited with having kept the process on course: in December 2007, he made an unscheduled return to stalled UN climate talks in Bali, Indonesia. Addressing differences between developing and developed states as the talks overran, he told them: “I am disappointed at the lack of progress. Your work is not yet done. Everybody should be able to make compromises.”

Whatever the weight of his intervention, delegates at Bali did indeed go on to reach a compromise, establishing a two-year “road map” leading to Copenhagen in December.

The Bali breakthrough came a month after Mr Ban visited Antarctica where he reflected: “These dramatic landscapes are rare and wonderful, but it is deeply disturbing as well. We can clearly see this world changing. The ice is melting far faster than we think.”

It was one of a series of apocalyptic warnings the secretary-general has sounded. The former foreign minister of South Korea, accused this year of being meek, has not muted his rhetoric on climate change: “If we fail to act, climate change will intensify droughts, floods and other natural disasters,” he told an environmental forum this summer. “Water shortages will affect hundreds of millions of people. Malnutrition will engulf large parts of the developing world. Tensions will worsen. Social unrest – even violence – could follow.”

It was a message he reinforced on a recent visit to the Arctic: he said failure to act would have serious consequences, “not just for polar bears in the Arctic, but for people on every continent and in every country”.

It is also one he is expected to reprise at the world climate summit on Tuesday where he hopes to galvanise world leaders gathered for the annual UN General Assembly.

Mr Ban’s Norway trip was briefly overshadowed by the leaking of a confidential memo by a senior Norwegian diplomat at the UN that criticised his ineffectiveness. “Even though the Secretary-General repeats ad nauseam that Copenhagen must ‘seal the deal’, there is widespread concern that the UN summit will not contribute anything worth mentioning in the process towards Copenhagen,” wrote Mona Juul, Norway’s deputy envoy in New York.

Although Mr Ban’s aides have been on the defensive over this and other criticisms, some analysts believe progress on climate change could help to secure his legacy.

“At a difficult time in his tenure, Copenhagen is an opportunity Ban needs to grab with both hands,” says Dean Bialek, who deals with climate issues at Independent Diplomat, a New York-based non-profit diplomatic advisory group. “He needs not only to ‘seal the deal’, but to make the Copenhagen agreement one that speaks for all countries, especially those at the forefront of the potentially devastating impacts of climate change.”