

UN report: Severe climate change may now be 'inevitable'

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Despite the fact that the November 24 federal election was supposed to be a “climate-change election”, the release on November 17 of the fourth and final report from the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) barely garnered mainstream media attention.

However, along with all the “usual” warnings about the dangers of climate change — the increase of extreme weather conditions such as droughts, floods, fires and storms and the escalation of human suffering due to hunger, malnutrition, disease and displacement — the report contained another crucial finding that has profound implications for humanity. It warned that we may have already passed the threshold beyond which dangerous climate change is inevitable.

“What the report establishes is that the amount of greenhouse gas in the atmosphere is already above the threshold that could potentially cause dangerous climate change”, Tim Flannery, one of Australia’s best known scientists and the winner of the 2007 Australian of the Year award, told the ABC’s October 8 Lateline program about the latest IPCC report.

Flannery, who had access to a preview of the report before its public release on November 17, said: “We thought we’d be at that threshold within about a decade, we thought we had that much time. But the new data indicates that in about mid-2005 we crossed that threshold. So as of mid-2005, there was about 455 parts per million of what’s called carbon dioxide equivalent...”

“So I guess if I was trying to summarise it, what it says is that we already stand an unacceptable risk of dangerous climate change and the need for action is ever more urgent.”

The language of the synthesis report is stronger than previous IPCC reports, which have been criticised for their overly conservative assessments of the threat posed by global warming. The latest report, however, warns of “abrupt or irreversible” impacts due to global warming.

“IPCC chiefs headed by chairman Rajendra Pachauri were stung by criticisms from scientists that their report on the physical science of climate change, agreed in February, had painted too rosy a picture”, the November 22 New Scientist reported. “The charge was that their efforts to concentrate on findings with a 90 per cent certainty or better had resulted in them leaving out scarier but less certain scenarios. The synthesis report tries to make amends. For instance, the February report predicted that sea levels will rise between 18 and 59 centimetres by 2100.”

Releasing the latest report, Pachauri acknowledged that a minimum sea level rise, even if emissions dropped rapidly, would be between 0.4 and 1.4 metres. He also accepted that if there were to be partial melting of polar ice sheets, this could lead to metres not centimeters of sea level rise.

However, even these predictions already seem out of step with the rapidity of climate change currently occurring. For example, a report by Australian-based climate change lobby group, the Carbon Equity Project, entitled *The Big Melt*, notes that the current rate of melting and disintegration of Arctic Sea ice could mean open blue seas in the northern summer as early as 2013 — a full century ahead of the IPCC's projections.

The *Big Melt* concludes that the rapid melting of Arctic Sea ice shows that the currently politically acceptable goal of aiming for a maximum of 2°C increase in global temperatures above the pre-Industrial Revolution level is no longer tenable. Instead, the current effects of an almost 1°C rise could already be triggering runaway climate change.

Unsurprisingly, the daunting scale of the problem, and the limited time-frame for which effective action can be taken, has newly dramatised the issue for most people, particularly over the last two years.

In the rich countries of Australia, Western Europe and the US demonstrations for action on climate change are becoming increasingly frequent and action groups are proliferating — no doubt spurred on by the realisation that the rich countries have been primarily responsible for creating the problem and thus have the greatest responsibility for solving it.

However, another potentially deadly reaction can also result — despair that anything can be done or at least done in time. The November 15 *Canberra Times* reported on a British survey that found that almost a quarter of respondents had become “bored with eco news”. The report noted that while 77% were “still engaged” with the issue, “it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that some have gone from ‘aware’ to ‘despair’ in a very short period of time”.

For those who are daunted but not despairing, there is another equally dangerous conclusion that can be drawn — that it is too late to change the existing political and economic structures that are the chief obstacles to solving the problem and therefore that environmental activists should confine themselves to working within these structures.

But how far will attitudes like these take us? Isn't it the current system that has brought us to the point of disaster? Scientists have been warning about global warming for more than 20 years, but this hasn't spurred on the ruling political elites, tied as they are to the polluting corporations, to take serious measures to halt global warming.

Today the talk from governments in the highest per capita CO₂ emitters, like Australia and the US, is all about promoting illusory solutions such “clean coal” and pollution trading scheme — “solutions” that entrench, rather than challenge, the interests of a wealthy business minority that has huge financial investments in the use of fossil fuels.

We need radical political and economic change in order to break the bonds between those in political power and those who profit from the use of fossil fuels, the source of global warming. Only then can the path be opened for a rapid “de-carbonisation” of our electricity generation and transportation systems.

But we don't only need fundamental political change to stop global warming, but also to be able to minimise the impact of its effects on the lives and livelihoods of working people in both the rich and poor countries.

The fact is today's world, dominated by voracious profit-hungry neoliberal capitalism, is utterly incapable of either minimising the extent of global warming or ameliorating its worst effects on the poor and vulnerable.

Certainly this is most evident in the Third World. In his article "2007: The Year of Climate Catastrophe" (posted on the British Marxsite.com website), British socialist Phil Hearse listed just some of the climate-change related natural disasters that have occurred this year, including:

"•Two waves of massive flooding in China in June and September-October in the centre and south of the country that have killed more than 1000 people. Connected with the same storms over southern China, Vietnam suffered widespread flooding in October and November which by the time this was written (early November) had killed more than 120 people.

"•The worst floods in living memory in Central Africa, stretching from coast to coast, devastating crops and drowning hundreds...

"•What the Mexican president called the 'greatest natural disaster of the country's history' as the state of Tabasco was submerged for the second time in a decade, leaving dozens dead and making 100,000 homeless.

"•Hundreds died in India in several waves of flooding from Mumbai, where 500 died, to Bihar where a similar trail of devastation occurred."

What has been the response of ruling elites in the rich countries to these disasters? Hearse wrote: "Much of this catastrophe has hardly been reported in the Western media — the fire risk to homes of Malibu celebs [during the major summer fires in California in late September] is of course of much more interest to the right-wing media than millions of workers and peasants in Africa or Asia!"

This is not to say that climate change induced suffering and exacerbated inequality will only affect those in poor countries. The horrendous neglect by President George Bush's administration of New Orleans' mainly poor black residents in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina was a stark warning that the poor and marginalised within the wealthy countries will most likely be left to fend for themselves when the catastrophic effects of climate change hit.

It seems that the US ruling elite is more interested in planning for a proliferation of climate change-induced wars over increasingly scarce supplies of food, water and oil than actually acting to stop climate change.

In February 2004, Fortune magazine reported that the Pentagon's latest planning for future wars is centred on "the eruption of desperate, all-out wars over food, water, and energy supplies".

The article reported that the Pentagon's planners envisage the US building "a fortress around itself to preserve resources. Borders are strengthened to hold back starving immigrants from Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean islands — waves of boat people

pose especially grim problems.”

This the barbaric “vision” that the rulers of the world’s richest country have for dealing with the social consequences of rapid onset of global warming.

There is an alternative path, exemplified by socialist Cuba. Despite being a poor country subjected for 45 years to US economic blockade, Cuba has made some unparalleled environmental achievements. Through transforming its agricultural system from fossil-fuel intensive farming to organic agriculture, reforesting significant sections of its land area, and implementing large-scale energy-efficiency measures, Cuba has become the only nation to achieve sustainable development, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

Cuba’s approach to minimising the impact of natural disasters on its population also contrasts starkly with the approach of the US after Hurricane Katrina. A 2002 Oxfam report concluded that Cuba’s “Civil Defence Force, early warning system, well-equipped rescue teams, emergency stockpiles and other resources ... are impressive, but if they were the only determining factor, then other wealthier countries such as the United States would have lower disaster death tolls. Thus, it is equally important to consider the role played by other ‘intangible’ qualities in making the Cuban system work so well. These include community mobilization, solidarity, clear political commitment to safeguard human life and a population that is ‘disaster-aware’ and educated in the necessary actions to be taken in the event of a disaster.”

The Oxfam report noted that “Cuba achievements in [natural disaster] risk reduction” are founded on a “socio-economic model that reduces vulnerability and invests in social capital through universal access to government services and promotion of social equity”.

These achievements are a product of the Cuba’s socialist orientation following its 1959-60 anti-capitalist revolution. As a result, Cuba has a government that seeks to look after the needs of the majority of its people, instead of the profits of a tiny minority of big-business-owning families.

Combatting the mounting climate-change catastrophe will require similar radical changes across rest of the world, so that we can create an international social and economic order based on human solidarity, not private greed.

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