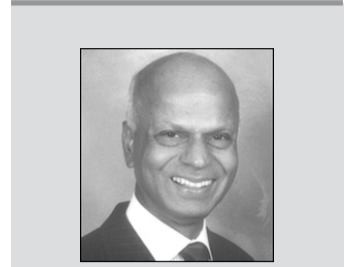


Beware of global warming: Our Earth is in danger



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writes from Madrid

THE summer that has just come to an end in Europe is considered by many as the hottest in many decades. In certain parts of southern Europe like Extremadura and Andalucia, temperature soared to 47° Celsius and beyond. In the northern part, although the temperature did not reach these extremes, it was unbearably hot as well. Temperature reached 38.1° Celsius in Britain, 40.8° in Germany and 42° in Paris, France. Seeking temporary relief, young people in Berlin, Rome and Venice took off their shirts and bathed in the fountains. (By the way, both of these activities - walking bare-chested and bathing in fountains - are prohibited by law in some European cities.) Thousands of old people (according to the French government over 11000, in France alone) died because of the heat wave. In the poultry farms across the continent, millions

perished. Although no accurate figures are available, in Spain, Portugal and France, many starving cattle also suffered the same fate. There is no doubt that this extraordinarily high temperature will have an adverse effect on this year's grain harvests. Fire destroyed hundreds of thousands of acres of forest in Portugal, Spain and France. Some people were killed and thousands were made homeless. Now luckily the heat-wave is over. But it has given way to uncontrollable floods in Spain, France and Italy which are proving to be equally disastrous. All this has created a sense of fear among the Europeans about climate change and the dreaded greenhouse problem.

Actually the greenhouse effect, in itself is not a problem for the humanity. In fact, if the Earth's surface were not surrounded by a blanket of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, water vapour and a few other minor gases), life on earth would not exist. The greenhouse effect becomes a problem when there is a process of "accelerated warming of Earth's surface due to anthropogenic (human activity-related) releases of greenhouse gases due to industrial activity and deforestation". This accelerated warming is also known as Global Warming. The emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere is intricately related to industrial activity. Carbon dioxide and methane are emitted as a result of fossil-fuel burning. Although it is

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The European Union is the only region of the industrialised world where the greenhouse gas emissions went down by 3.5 per cent in 2000 in comparison with the emissions in 1990. This indeed is a good news. But the fact remains that an extra tonne of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere will have the same deleterious environmental effect, no matter whether it is emitted in the United States, India or Europe. Global warming control is a global issue, therefore more forceful actions on a global basis are required, for example, a comprehensive plan of sanctions and rewards under the auspices of the United Nations.



Parisians coping with unusual hot climate: Reportedly more than 11,000 died in France alone in the unprecedented European heat wave.

difficult to assess the exact impact of global warming, there is a consensus of opinion that if the current trends in the emission of greenhouse gases continue, natural and agricultural ecosystems will be substantially altered. There will also be significant impacts on human and animal health. (I have already mentioned that this summer thousands of humans and animals died in Europe because of unusually high temperature.) Due to the rapid melting of polar ice, sea levels will rise. (Coastal areas of Bangladesh and the nearby islands will most probably disappear under water.) There will, most certainly, be other consequences which we cannot even imagine at this point of time.

Since economic activities have brought material progress and well-being to humankind, one can not stop them because of possible damages caused by greenhouse problem. Therefore, we have to find ways and means to reduce emissions, while continuing with industrial activities. This is also true that no one nation single-handedly can do much to counteract the greenhouse gas build-up in the atmosphere.

The Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1992 tried to address both these issues. It was truly an international conference. It was attended by 117 heads of state and representatives of 178 nations. Among the many treaties and conventions that came out of the deliberations at the conference, the one that drew most attention was the Framework Convention on Climate Change (also known as Global Warming Convention). Although the treaty did not set

binding targets for emission reductions of carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases, the signatories agreed to reduce their emissions as a binding obligation. Another convention called Agenda 21 "outlined global strategies for cleaning up the environment and encouraging environmentally sound economic development. Although these were considered as noble objectives by all the participants, there were significant discrepancies in the way to implement the recommendations. The less industrialised countries of the South were not prepared to accept the emission restrictions imposed by the heavily industrialised North unless they received adequate compensation from the North.

A second meeting of the FCCC (Framework Convention on Climate Change) was held in Kyoto, Japan in 1997 with the objective of setting greenhouse gas emission targets that will be binding under international law. The target set by the Kyoto Protocol for the industrialised countries was a 5.2 per cent reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions by 2010 relative to 1990. No mandatory targets were set for developing countries. The target for the EU was a 8 per cent reduction, the United States 7 per cent and Japan 6 per cent. In order to make the proposals more attractive to the rich nations, the Kyoto Protocol introduced a curious carbon trading system. Since a tonne of gas causes the same damage to the global environment, no matter where it is emitted, the US can keep its high compliance costs down by paying for the low compliance costs in say, a country in eastern Europe,

and obtaining paper credit for the amount of emission reductions, which can then be set against the target for the US.

This was the situation in 1997. No doubt, the Kyoto Protocol held out the promises of a safer world. There were even talks of carbon-free renewable energy and fuel-efficient transport. What is the situation today, six years after the Kyoto Protocol?

I am afraid, the current situation is not very encouraging. According to data on greenhouse gas emissions, recently published by the UNEP, instead of any global reductions as agreed under the Kyoto Protocol, they (the emissions) actually went up by 8 per cent in 2000 in comparison with the emissions in 1990. Actually, during the same period, the emissions went up in the US by 16.8 per cent, in India by 62.8 per cent, in Japan by 12.3 per cent in China by 4.6 per cent and in Australia by 23.8 per cent. The United States continued to be the world's largest polluter and even increased its share as a percentage of total emissions of the world (from 23.47 per cent to 25.39 per cent). The Bush administration does not seem to be conscious of its country's dubious honour of being the world's largest polluter. This is not the end of the story. Actually things are likely to get far worse if courts do not overturn Bush's recent decision to violate the provisions of the Clean Air Act 1977, which required power plants, refineries and industries "to install modern pollution-control technology whenever they modified their plants in ways that increased emissions". Now Bush's new rules will allow the refineries and the industries to expand their plants

gas and other pollutants in the atmosphere.

So far Bush's record on ecological and environmental issues has been pretty dismal. He has steadfastly refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, tried to drill in Alaska and California for oil and proposed the destruction of thousands of acres of forest on flimsy grounds. Writing about Bush's attempts to distort science for political or ideological ends, Charles Levendosky of the Casper Star-Tribune of Wyoming recently pointed out that, "reports on global warming issued by the Environmental Protection Agency warning were suppressed. The administration's use of false information permeates other areas of public policy: safe drinking water, agricultural pollution, food safety, lead poisoning....."

It is heartening to note that in Europe there is a much greater awareness of the dangers of global warming. The recent heat

wave has contributed further to this awareness. Again quoting the UNEP figures, the European Union is the only region of the industrialised world where the greenhouse gas emissions went down by 3.5 per cent in 2000 in comparison with the emissions in 1990. This indeed is a good news. But the fact remains that an extra tonne of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere will have the same deleterious environmental effect, no matter whether it is emitted in the United States, India or Europe. Global warming control is a global issue, therefore more forceful actions on a global basis are required, for example, a comprehensive plan of sanctions and rewards under the auspices of the United Nations.