

2020 EMISSIONS

Precedent-setting or bucking the trend?

AFP, Paris

For a few moments in late April of 2020, oil -- normally the lifeblood of the world economy -- became more expensive to store than to pay someone to take it away.

Crude oil's wildly fluctuating futures prices reflected the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, with record falls in greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel demand making 2020 an unexpectedly good year for the climate.

The United Nations and the Global Carbon Project both said this month that planet-warming carbon pollution was set to fall seven percent this year, the largest single-year drop in history.

As pressure mounts on governments to match action to their promises to slash emissions, such a historic drop is welcome even if it only came about due to the pandemic.

It puts 2020 roughly in line with what the UN says is needed to keep the Paris climate deal goal of limiting warming to 1.5C within reach.

But with distribution of several Covid-19 vaccines ramping up in 2021, enabling an anticipated global economic rebound, will 2020 be the start of an annual downward emissions trend, or just a momentary blip?

"I am afraid that if governments do not take major new policies we may well see that the decline we are experiencing in emissions this year will rebound," Fatih Birol, executive director of the International Energy Agency, told AFP.

"If governments do not put clean energy policies in their economic recovery packages we will go back to where we were before the pandemic."

Birol pointed to China, the world's largest polluter, which he said was an "important test run" for how other nations power their Covid-19 recovery.

"We all know China was the first country to have the



Smoke and steam billow from Belchatow Power Station, Europe's largest coal-fired power plant at night near Belchatow, Poland. Picture taken on December 5, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS

coronavirus, the first where there was a lockdown and where the economy declined," he said. "But China is also the first country where the economy rebounded and as of today Chinese emissions are higher than levels before the crisis."

The UN in its annual Emissions Gap report said last week that 2020's dip in emissions would have only a "negligible impact" on long-term warming without a profound shift towards green energy.

It said emissions hit a record high in 2019 of 59.1 billion tonnes of CO2 equivalent -- a whopping 2.6 percent higher than the year before.

Yet the countries that pollute the most have prioritised sectors heavily reliant on fossil fuels in their stimulus packages.

In October, a study by manufacturer Wartsila and Energy Policy Tracker found

that G20 nations had earmarked \$145 billion for clean energy solutions as part of their recovery funding. This compared with \$216 billion that had been pledged for fossil energy, the analysis showed.

The UN said this month that production of oil, gas and coal needed to fall 6 percent annually through 2030 to stay on a 1.5-C course.

Its Production Gap assessment showed however that countries plan to increase fossil fuel production 2 percent per year this decade.

This is despite record low costs for renewable energy technology such as solar and wind.

Kingsmill Bond, energy strategist at the market watchdog Carbon Tracker, said he was confident that 2019 would turn out to have been the peak in emissions, as industry wakes up to the new economics of power.

He said the "cyclical shock" of Covid-19 had brought forward a downwards trend in carbon pollution which was set to happen anyway, pandemic or not.

"Global coal demand peaked in 2013. Fossil fuels going into electricity peaked in 2018, even before the crisis. It's been happening all the while," Bond told AFP.

He said renewables could now accommodate all global energy demand growth -- roughly 6 exajoules per year -- meaning that fossil fuel demand should peak "by definition".

To square the circle between the needed six-percent annual cut in fossil production and countries' two-percent growth plans, Bond pointed to a fundamental economic principle: supply and demand.

"The supply is continuing to chum because the incumbents haven't realised what's going

on -- there's just not going to be demand for it," he said.

"Imagine you're the Canadian government. You can subsidise production of oil as much as you like, but if the Chinese don't buy it, tough."

IEA chief Birol said the G20 currently spends a total of over \$300 billion in "inefficient" fossil fuel subsidies.

"Fossil fuels today enjoy a significant amount of subsidies from governments, mainly in emerging economies, which creates unfair competition for clean energy sources, distorts the markets and leads to inefficient use of energy," he said.

As well as an unprecedented drop in emissions, 2020 saw numerous large emitters -- including China and Japan -- commit to achieving carbon neutrality for the first time.

Climate Action Tracker has calculated that countries' current net-zero plans, if enacted, could limit warming to 2.1C -- not Paris-compliant, but better than the current course of more than 3C of heating by 2100.

Corinne Le Quere, a climatologist and co-chair of the Global Carbon Project, said she expected emissions to rebound in 2021 and to plateau in the years to follow.

And although emissions tumbled in 2020, the climate responds to greenhouse gas levels already in the atmosphere.

The Global Monitoring Laboratory at the Mauna Loa Observatory on December 8th measured CO2 concentrations at 412.87 parts per million -- 0.36 percent higher than the same day last year.

"It's like water in a bathtub," said Le Quere.

"For the last 100 years we have had the tap open and the water running, increasing the volume of CO2 in the atmosphere.

"In 2020, we turned the tap down a little, but the water level continues to rise."



Norway okays giant North Sea carbon storage project

AFP, Oslo

Norway gave approval Tuesday to a giant project to capture and store CO2 below the North Sea, a technology that could help efforts to reduce carbon emissions.

The Northern Lights project aims to inject CO2 captured from Norwegian industrial firms into geological formations 2,600 metres (8,530 feet) below the seabed where it should be trapped permanently.

Initially the project aims to capture and store 1.5 million tonnes of CO2 per year from 2024, but could be expanded to handle as much as 5 million tonnes per year.

The day after Norwegian lawmakers gave their go-ahead, the government agreed on Tuesday to finance 80 percent of the 650-million-euro (\$790 million) cost of the first stage of the project.

"Carbon capture and storage is important to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement" that aims to limit the rise in global temperatures by reducing carbon emissions, said Norway's Petroleum and Energy Minister Tina Bru.

Prohibitive costs have held back carbon capture and storage (CCS) as a technology so far although there have been a number of projects announced in recent years.

But while it may help decarbonise heavy industries, many environmentalists see it as a false solution as it would justify maintaining dirty production.

Norwegian oil and gas firm Equinor, France's Total and Anglo-Dutch Shell are partners in the project.

The project will initially take liquefied CO2 from a cement plant and transport it by ship to the injection site.

An Oslo incinerator could also supply CO2 in the future.



'Next days decisive' in Brexit talks

Says EU chief

AFP, Brussels

British and European negotiators have made progress towards agreeing fair trade rules but are still far apart on access to fishing, EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said yesterday.

"The next days are going to be decisive," the president of the European Commission told the European Parliament, as intense talks on a post-Brexit trade deal continued nearby in Brussels.

"The good news is that we have found a way forward on most issues," she said, adding that she and EU negotiator Michel Barnier can now see a "narrow path to an agreement".

"But this is now a case of us being so close, and yet being so far away from each other, because two issues still remain outstanding, you know them: a level playing field and the fisheries."

Von der Leyen said that Barnier and his UK counterpart David Frost had made progress towards resolving rules for state aid to businesses and that the ways the deal will be governed "by now are largely being resolved."

But she was pessimistic on fish. Britain is insisting that when it leaves the EU single market at the end of the year it will resume full control over access to its waters.

EU member states are holding out to preserve quotas for their crews fishing in UK waters and they want a long-term arrangement to provide stability.

Britain has so far only offered reduced access and annual quota renegotiations.

"On fisheries, the discussion is still very difficult," von der Leyen said.

US SANCTIONS OVER RUSSIAN ARMS PURCHASE

Move attack on Turkey's sovereignty: Erdogan

AFP, Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday called US sanctions against Ankara over its purchase of a Russian missile defence system an "open attack" on the Nato member state's sovereignty.

The United States made good on months of threats to punish Turkey for buying the S-400 system under a 2017 law known as CAATSA, which aims to limit Russia's military influence and punish it for its behaviour abroad.

The sanctions were lighter than feared, but Erdogan noted that they had never before been used against a fellow member of Nato.

"Sanctions are imposed on our country, a Nato member. What kind of an alliance is this?" Erdogan asked during a televised speech in Ankara.

"This decision is an open attack on our sovereignty," he added.

Washington had already punished Ankara in July by barring it from developing parts for and acquiring America's next-generation F-35 fighter jets.

This week's punitive measures included a ban on all US export licences and loan credits for Turkey's military procurement agency.

Its president Ismail Demir and three

other executives were also barred from travel or holding assets in the US.

The State Department said the sanctions "are not intended to undermine the military capabilities or combat readiness of Turkey... but rather to impose costs on Russia in response to its wide range of malign activities".

But in his first public comments about the sanctions, Erdogan called them unjust.

He repeated Turkey's claim that Washington would not sell the US equivalent to the S-400, the Patriot, to Ankara. US officials say Turkey was offered the system, but that negotiations broke down after Ankara demanded to also obtain proprietary production and operations data about the Patriots.

"The more Turkey grows, the more Turkey inches closer to its goals, the more it stands up for its sovereign rights, the more it is subjected to attacks," Erdogan said.

The sanctions are the latest thorn in US-Turkey relations, with the Nato allies at loggerheads over Syria, Libya and the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

But with a month before the swearing in of President-elect Joe Biden, who once described Erdogan as an "autocrat", Ankara's language has generally softened towards Washington.

Iran 'very happy' Trump leaving

Says Rouhani as Khamenei warns US 'enmities' towards Tehran won't end ; nuclear deal parties try to defuse tensions

AFP, Tehran

President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday that Iran was "very happy" over the looming departure from office of US counterpart Donald Trump, who led a campaign of "maximum pressure" against the Islamic republic.

President-elect Joe Biden, who defeated Trump at the ballot box in November, has signalled a willingness to return to diplomacy with Iran after four tense years under the outgoing president.

"Some say you are overexcited by the advent of Mr. Biden. No, we are not, but we are very happy to see Trump leave," he said in televised comments at a cabinet meeting.

"Thank God, these are his final days," Rouhani added, calling Trump a "tyrant", "the most unruly, lawless president" and a "terrorist and murderer".

His comment came before Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that US "enmities" towards Iran will not cease with the looming departure from office of Trump.

He reiterated his position that Iran should bolster itself to "nullify" sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, but should "not



delay" in the event they can be lifted. "You witnessed what Trump's America and Obama's America did to you," he was quoted as saying on his official website. "Enmities are not limited to Trump's America and will not end just because he has left office," Khamenei added, addressing the family of top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, who was killed in a January US air strike in neighbouring Iraq. "Do not trust the enemy, this is my explicit advice."

Meanwhile, the remaining parties to the faltering 2015 Iran nuclear accord met yesterday after Tehran announced plans for a new breach of the deal.

The meeting of the so-called "joint commission" included China, France, Russia, Iran, Germany and Britain

and was chaired by senior EU foreign affairs official Helga Schmid.

The meeting, which lasted around two hours, was held virtually because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The 2015 deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has unravelled steadily since Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and went on to impose crippling economic sanctions on Iran.

Tehran has retaliated by progressively abandoning limits on its nuclear activity laid down in the deal, most recently planning to install advanced centrifuges at Iran's main nuclear enrichment plant in Natanz.

Last week France, Germany and Britain -- collectively known as the "E3" -- condemned the plan as "deeply worrying".



People party on a street on Tuesday as pubs shut for the night due to tier 3 restrictions in Soho in London, Britain. London yesterday moved into the highest level of coronavirus restrictions in an effort to control rising infection rates, dealing another blow to hospitality venues before Christmas.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Landmark ruling links death of UK schoolgirl to pollution

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION

Air pollution contributed to the death of a London schoolgirl, a coroner ruled on Wednesday in a landmark case that could push Britain to get tougher on traffic and clean up city air.

After a two-week inquest, coroner Philip Barlow said the death in 2013 of Ella Kissi-Debrah, aged 9, was caused by acute respiratory failure, severe asthma and exposure to pollution.

"I will conclude that Ella died of asthma contributed to by exposure to excessive air pollution," said Barlow from Southwark Coroner's Court in south London.

He said air pollution was a "significant contributory factor" that had exacerbated her asthma, with the principal source of her exposure being traffic emissions.

Under European Union (EU) laws, the annual average concentration level of nitrogen dioxide cannot exceed 40 micrograms per cubic metre of air (ug/m3) - a target Britain has missed for a decade.

It is unclear whether Britain will stick to that limit now it has left the EU, though the government has pledged to include air-quality targets as part of an environment bill.

The coroner said Kissi-Debrah's mother, Rosamund, was not informed of the health risks of air pollution, otherwise she would



have taken steps to prevent her daughter's death.

Campaigners and legal experts said the "historic" verdict could push the British government to get tough on air pollution.

The United Nations says air pollution should be viewed as a matter of human rights, causing 7 million premature deaths a year, 600,000 of them children.

Prolonged exposure to pollutants can cause diabetes, lung disease and cancer, and early evidence suggests air pollution may be linked to higher death rates among Covid-19 patients.

About 40,000 deaths in Britain are linked to air pollution, according to a 2016 study by the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.