

WSSD Secretary General optimistic of a global deal on sustainable development

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WITH negotiations at the fourth preparatory meeting in Bali ongoing, the United Nations Secretary General for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Nitin Desai expects delegates to produce a strong action plan and political declaration for implementing sustainable development principles. He calls it the Bali Commitment.

In an exclusive interview at his office room at Bali International Convention Centre, the charismatic UN top boss for sustainable development shared with these correspondents his ideas on the Bali Commitment. During the interview, Nitin as usual was very optimistic about the success of the on-going fourth preparatory committee meeting (PrepCom IV) and the forthcoming WSSD at Johannesburg from August 26-September 7, 2002.

Nitin sees no problem in the implementation of the Bali Commitment, if agreed upon during this PrepCom IV and ultimately the Johannesburg Implementation Plan to help achieve sustainable development across the world.

He foresees at least US \$ 12 billion additional funding commitment from EU and USA made at Monterrey in March this year for implementation of WSSD follow-up programmes.

The following are excerpts:
Ques: The whole world is now on the road to Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development. As the WSSD secretary general, you are a key player. How do you assess the preparatory process so far and what are the key issues now the delegates negotiating?

Ans: Fourth PrepCom has a major commitment on water and sanitation. Sanitation is a very important issue on the earth. Many areas are densely populated. Even villages are densely settled, so we are working to give major thrust to the global sanitation and global water.

Lot of discussion has been going on in Fourth PrepCom on drinking water and sanitation. People use water in agriculture, to drink and cook in various types of production activities and for day-to-day life. So this is a major area of work. I hope a consensus will come through the summit.

Of course the summit has a broader agenda. Not only the energy, not only the health, not only the agriculture, not only the biodiversity and ecosystem management, the negotiators are working on various subjects, including those. If you see the process of negotiation, how 190 countries' negotiators are working through long arguments on what to do and how.

Ques: Are the discussions really focusing on all three dimensions of sustainable development?

Ans: It is also clear. The focus is

more on sustainable development, those situation that are more directly involved, the economical, the environmental and social aspects. The local governance is also an important element. The local government is a big issue, as it covers many different areas. But the focus is more on economic and environmental issues.

Ques: How do you describe the progress thus far?

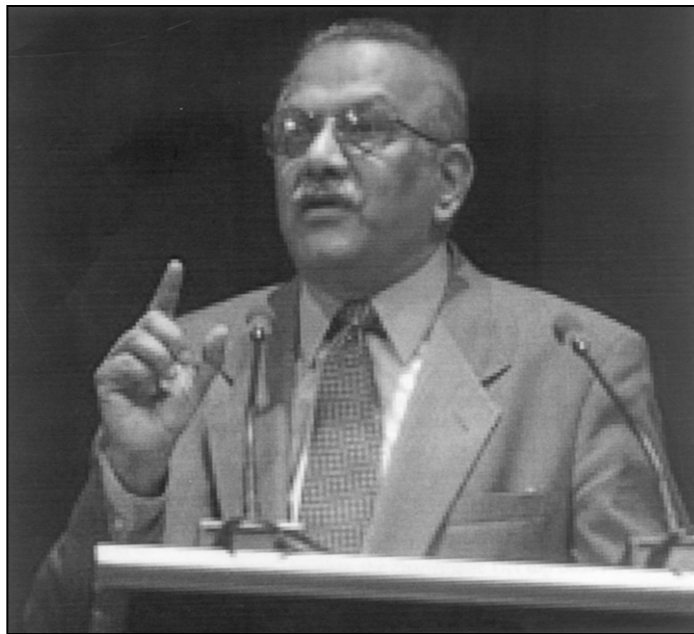
Ans: I will use the phrase many here are using, slowly but steady. It means the pace in terms of the numbers of paragraphs etc., which have been agreed upon is slow. But what has been done is

very definite: Things are being finalized and decided.

Ques: What are the main issues being negotiated?

Ans: The whole issue is the form in which the commitment will be stated. How firm will the targets be? How firm is the language on the programmes? These are very important things which are being negotiated. But once they come to an agreement, then a lot of things fall in place. Like the language of finance, once you fix it in one place, a lot of other things get cleared up.

I would say at this stage some basic issues are being hammered



WSSD Secretary General Nitin Desai

out, then we will be at a stage to ensure consistency.

People are negotiating in different working groups and contacts groups. Then when everybody comes together, you'll have to

decide on what is the formulation that should be used throughout. That's the sort of thing we start doing on Friday.

Ques: What are the chances for a strong document?

Ans: I don't know about that. A lot of countries support the idea of time definite goals, the NGOs are clearly in favour.

Ques: The negotiations should conclude by Friday. What do you expect the delegations do?

Ans: What I expect from them is to clear up as many things as possible, so that when we start on Friday we have some well-defined areas of the differences, which we shall resolve. So certainly the text, which will come out on Friday will have fewer alternatives than the text, which is being looked at now.

We are working on the assumption that we complete our work. But there is a lot to do, on the political declaration, on the preparation for Johannesburg and what is it that we need to do, to put some credible programme of implementation between Bali and Johannesburg.

My hope is that we really do complete our work by the weekend on the programme of action.

The Bali commitment as I call it.

Ques: Will there be any change from here to Johannesburg?

Ans: The programme of action will be decided here. What will be done now is on the political declaration. Bali will give the outlines, the elements, but the actual drafting and discussion on that will take place in Johannesburg.

But the main product of the Summit is what we think will be, what I call the Bali Commitment. If it is strong enough, we'll call it the Bali Commitment.

Ques: And if the programme is not strong enough?

Ans: We'll still call it Bali something, perhaps the Bali Programme.

Ques: Many people say the implementation (of the 1992 Rio Declaration) was too weak and they fear this could happen again.

Ans: Yes, so I think a lot of focus here is on what we need to do to keep up the pressure. This sort of thing falls under the name of accountability and responsibility. Much of the discussion on the institutional issue here is on that. And I expect this will remain an important dimension between now and Johannesburg. People will correctly ask: Okay, how do we ensure that this gets implemented? What do we

need to do beyond Johannesburg? So this is very correct and we will see a lot of discussion here also on the follow up mechanism which focuses on this.

This will be a major item. We call it the accountability and responsibility monitoring discussion.

Ques: And after Johannesburg?

Ans: I think the main thing is we really have to make sure that we implement what will be decided in Johannesburg. The real thing beyond Johannesburg, is to make sure that we actually meet the promise. Because the whole point of Johannesburg is implementation. This means we have to really make sure that we get to the sources, we get the programme in place, that we assist the countries in need of assistance, that we help the countries in formulating their own plans. All of these things you will have to take up. So there is a lot of work beyond Johannesburg to do.

The work is with the countries, the UN is not a negotiator. It is there to facilitate.

Ques: How do you foresee the journey of humankind along the road of sustainable development? Do you think that the Johannesburg summit will really be successful?

Ans: Let's see what they decide. There are various issues. But we just need a hook. Then what are the key areas? Water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity. The hooks are there. What has been discussed there? Just that strong the hook is. Suppose, I just have a general statement: We shall increase the proportion of renewable energy. It's a very big hook and there are many stronger hooks. In addition to that if they give timetable that we want to produce that by 2003. That's a new stronger hook. On top of that, they also talk about resources. That's a far stronger hook. So it's the question of degree, but the hooks are there.

So programmes and their implementation depend on how much the hook is strong, on which we all the core global partners, on water and sanitation, on energy, on health and environment, on agriculture and biodiversity can rely. And that has been really discussed and debated here. So let us see that, in terms of outcome.

I think the PrepCom has succeeded in identifying the ideas. It has succeeded in placing the clear

focus on anti-poverty agenda, on the environment agenda. The PrepCom has succeeded in identifying the key issues, water, sanitation, energy for people, access to energy, help increase agricultural productivity, land and water management. That's are prime issues have been identified.

Ques: Nitin, as a seasoned UN executive, you know whatever be the political declaration, whatever be the Bali Commitment, ultimately at the end of the day it depends on the quality of implementation. Do you think this time, you are also addressing the whole question of implementation?

Ans: The quality of implementation depends on how stronger the hook is. Think of the hook, on which the implementation programmes will be designed. The programmes will be designed at the country level, regional level and international level. And the stronger the hook is the clearer is the guidance for the programme design.

The second issue is fund, the resources. This time, all has been changed. We have received commitment. We have got commitment in Monterrey in March. The EU has committed and increases its overseas development assistances. They will raise their assistance, in additional seven to eight billion dollars by 2006. The US has committed to increase their assistance by five billion dollars extra by 2006. In total 12 to 13 billion dollars extra.

So the money has been committed in Monterrey. Now we are looking at programme design, which has a clear goal. We are looking for programmes which would be implemented by utilizing the committed resources. The programmes should be connected with the overall goals of poverty reduction. Even we have to consider the child mortality issue. You see, the mortality of children is there because of poor water, poor sanitation. That's a good strong hook. If you provide water, sanitation it will address child mortality.

Ques: So, you are more or less satisfied with the progress of work in this PrepCom?

Ans: I think we already have enough progress. Let us see, what comes in the process of few days.

Global warming : Meltdown can be prevented

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

SCIENCE has now become clear: most new evidence confirms that global warming should be taken seriously. The report by the UN's Inter-governmental panel on Climate Change (IPCC) made up of world's top climate scientists concludes that man's actions have contributed substantially to the observed warming over the last 50 years. The warming trend exhibited by the build up of carbon dioxide and other green house gases in the atmosphere has caused serious climatic disruptions around the globe in recent time. The result according to scientists could be droughts, melting ice caps, rising sea levels, coastal flooding, severe storms and other climatic calamities.

Glaciers provide especially good ways to find out if our climate is changing. "Since they are typically formed as a response to cold climate, glaciers always reflect any change in climate", so says Gergan a glaciologist from the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology, Dehradun. After making numerous trips to the Dokriani Bamak glacier, a 5 km-long python of ice and mud that snakes through upper reaches of Garhwal, Himalays, Joseph Gergan is convinced that global warming trend has set in. After North India's freezing winter in 1998 and successive years, he expected the glacier to move forward. Instead it outran its annual average of about 16 m and retreated by an all time high of 20 m. Since 1998, Bangladesh and India have been experiencing hottest summers accompanied by extreme weather conditions surpassing all previous records. Mentionably, parts of India, including West Bengal, Bangladesh and China had the worst flood in a century. The prime explanation for

such freakish weather conditions is global warming, the heating up of the earth as forests are cut down crippling the earth's ability to absorb the rising clouds of carbon dioxide from its factories and vehicles.

No one disputes that the West is largely to blame for the existing greenhouse cover. But it is equally clear that the future trouble lies in Asia. South Korea already has the fastest growth rate for CO2 production in the industrial world. If the current trends continue, this nation of 45 million people will be the world's number - two CO2 producer by the year 2030, according to the Korean Federation of Environmental Movements. Canadian Sinologist and environmental expert Vaclav Smil predicts that by 2020 China will have displaced the United States as the

world's leading producer of greenhouse gases. According to National Institute for Environmental Studies in Japan, Asia now generates 25 percent of all CO2 emissions, but at current rates of growth that figure will rise to 50 percent over the next century.

That means around the globe from Asia to Europe to the U.S., human activity is heating up the planet. The signs seem to point that way: weather patterns have become more erratic. As a general pattern we have been experiencing higher temperatures, says an expert

decade they have been made small enough to fit in inside a car. The NECAR4 based on a Mercedes-Benz A class sedan accommodates five people plus luggage reaches speeds of 90 m.p.h. (145 km/h) and goes about 280 miles (450 km) between fill-ups. By 2004, Daimler-Chrysler and Ford as well as GM, Toyota and other companies expect to be selling fuel cell cars directly to consumers.

In an ideal situation the hydrogen may be produced sustainably with renewable electricity from the sun or wind. But till now the electricity required to split H2O (Water) into H (Hydrogen) and O (Oxygen) would be prohibitively expensive. So the first large-scale plants will probably wrest hydrogen from old-fashioned fossil fuels. That's very much a good news for China, whose gigantic-size rapid industrialisation and huge domestic coal reserves threaten to pump cataclysmic amounts of carbon dioxide into the air over the next century. While scaling fuel cells down to fit inside cars and trucks is a challenge, but scaling them up or linking them together to run factories and power plants should be no problem at all.

There is still some untoward effect in pulling hydrogen from fossil fuels in the sense that it leaves carbon dioxide behind. If the carbon dioxide is vented into the atmosphere, global warming will be as big a problem as ever. Engineers are thinking of an alternative to pump it into the ground. In Norway, for example, the energy company Norsk Hydro is building a power plant that will be fueled with hydrogen drawn from natural gas. The CO2 that's left over will be reinjected into an oil field on the continental shelf. Not only will this take the carbon dioxide out of circulation but it will also pressurize the field and make the remaining oil easier to pump out. In Europe and the U.S., pumping CO2 into underground aquifers has proved an effective way of keeping it out of the atmosphere.

Fossil fuels will remain an important energy source for the foreseeable future, but they will eventually run out and the world will have to switch to what environmental visionaries have been dreaming about since the original Earth Day: endlessly renewable power from wind

Ideally, every factory, building, home and vehicle would have its own clear, renewable power source, eliminating oil wells, coal mines, power plants and power lines--and all the environmental disruption they cause. For now, the world has a more urgent mission: to stop the planet from overheating, and to do it in a hurry. Thanks to the fuel-cell cars and more advanced wind turbines and solar cells that are close to fruition, the global-warming challenge seems a little less daunting than it did just a few years ago.

coal, oil and gasoline for heat, electricity and transportation is trapping excess energy from the sun. Carbon dioxide is produced when fossil fuels are used or when forests are burned. Agriculture releases other powerful greenhouse gases (GHGS) such as methane and nitrous oxide. Industrial processes release chemicals known as halocarbons (including CFCs) and other long-lived gases some of which trap heat in the atmosphere. A study by a team led by James Hansen of America's space Agency, NASA, has looked in detail at the net effects of these factors. It distinguishes natural "forcings" from man-made ones, and works out the impact of each on temperature. Under natural conditions, the earth releases heat at the same rate at which it absorbs energy from the sun. But the researchers conclude that man's actions since 1850 have upset the balance. Man-made GHGs now cause a forcing of more than two watts per square metre, the equivalent of increasing the sun's brightness by around 1%. The study says that increasing GHGs are estimated to be the largest forcing and to result in a net positive forcing during the past few decades". Dr. Hansen stresses the big impact of GHGs other than CO2. Global warming as such is real and will probably get worse.

The only way to slow it down is to restructure the way we produce energy. Such stop-gap measures as insulation, carpooling and energy efficient light bulbs are all useful ways to begin curbing the burning of carbon rich fossil fuels. But in the long run as the world's population continues to increase and living standards rise these measures will not be enough. Experiments now going on in laboratories around the world are not only important but encouraging too. At a research centre outside Stuttgart, Germany engineers at Daimler Chrysler have created a high performance car whose tail pipe emits nothing but water vapour. In a giant wind tunnel at NASA's Ames Research Centre in California engineers are set to analyse air turbulence in order to make super efficient wind power turbines. In Japan scientists are perfecting paper-thin solar cells that will be cheap to produce and could

decade they have been made small enough to fit in inside a car. The NECAR4 based on a Mercedes-Benz A class sedan accommodates five people plus luggage reaches speeds of 90 m.p.h. (145 km/h) and goes about 280 miles (450 km) between fill-ups. By 2004, Daimler-Chrysler and Ford as well as GM, Toyota and other companies expect to be selling fuel cell cars directly to consumers.

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