Developing nations became top investors in renewables in 2015: UN

AFP, Paris

INVESTMENT in renewable energy hit a record $286 billion (256 billion euros) in 2015, more than half of which came from developing countries for the first time, according to a UN report released Thursday.

All told, new money put into solar, wind, biofuels and other cleaner energy technologies has exceeded $2.3 trillion since 2004, when total investment was less than $50 billion, it said.

"Renewables are becoming ever more central to our low-carbon lifestyles," said Achim Steiner, executive director of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), which co-wrote the report.

"Importantly, for the first time in 2015, renewables investments were higher in developing countries than developed."

That shift was led by China and India, both of which have invested heavily in clean energy even as their juggernaut economies continue to be mainly powered by carbon-intensive fossil fuels.

Renewables added more to global energy generation capacity in 2015 than all other technologies combined, including nuclear, coal, gas and mega-hydro projects of more than 50 megawatts.

Despite rock-bottom fossil fuel prices, new clean energy capacity -- even excluding nuclear -- outstripped new coal and gas by more than 100 percent, said the report, Global Trends in Renewable Energy Investment 2016.

The rapid transition to renewables, especially in developing and emerging economies, is "helped by sharply reduced costs, and by the benefits of local power production over reliance on imported commodities," said Michael Liebreich, chairman of the advisory board of Bloomberg New Energy Finance, which co-launched the report.

As in previous years, the growth in clean energy in 2015 was dominated by solar photovoltaics and wind, which together added 118 gigawatts in generating capacity, nearly a quarter more than the year before.

Wind contributed 62GW and photovoltaics 56 GW, with more modest inputs coming from biomass, geothermal, solar thermal and "waste-to-power", in which waste products are recycled.

The fact that renewables far exceeded conventional energy for new capacity in 2015 shows that a "structural change is underway", the report said.

But the ultimate goal of a "carbon neutral" global economy enshrined by the world's nations at UN climate talks in Paris in December is still a distant prospect.

Excluding major hydro projects, renewables still only account for 16 percent of the world's total power capacity, even if that figure has consistently climbed by double digits in recent years.

Actual electricity generated is even less -- barely 10 percent.

"Despite the ambitious signals from COP21 and the growing capacity of new installed renewable energy, there is still a long way to go," said Udo Steffens, president of the Frankfurt School or Finance and Management.

The Paris Agreement inked at the 195-nation "COP21" talks vowed to cap global warming at below two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), a goal that scientists say will require a wholesale shift away from fossil fuels.

Much of the record-breaking investment in clean energy last year came from China, which spent nearly $103 billion (92 billion euros), 17 percent more than in 2014 and 36 percent of the world total.

India was a distant second, spending $10.2 billion, followed by South Africa ($4.5 billion), Mexico ($4 billion) and Chile ($3.4 billion).

Morocco, Turkey and Uruguay filled out the list of nations investing at least $1 billion.

Overall, developing countries poured 17 times more money into clean energy last year than in 2004.

Among wealthy nations, investment in Europe was down 21 percent, from $62 billion in 2014 to $48.8 billion in 2015, the continent's lowest figure in nearly a decade despite record development of offshore wind power.

US investment rose 19 percent to $44.1 billion, while Japan's held steady at $36.2 billion.

AP/FILE

An array of solar panels absorbs the power of the sun, in northwestern China.

China-backed bank says over 30 countries await membership

REUTERS, Boao, China

More Than 30 countries are waiting to join the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), adding to its 57 founding members, its president said on Friday.

The AIIB, first proposed by President Xi Jinping less than two years ago, has become one of China's biggest foreign policy successes.

Despite the opposition of Washington, almost many major U.S. allies - Australia, Britain, German, Italy, the Philippines and South Korea - have joined.

China says it will be an international institution and not used to boost its influence.

Speaking on the sidelines of the Boao Forum on southern China's Hainan island, AIIB president Jin Liqun said the bank was working on accepting the new members.

"Over the past two years, we have achieved the purpose of convincing all the members – now we have 57, with more than 30 countries on the waiting list eager to join," Jin said, responding to a question about whether member countries were convinced the bank was not being used by China to draw countries into its orbit.

Japan inflation unchanged at zero in Feb

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese consumer inflation stuck at zero in February for the second straight month, marking another blow to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's struggle to end nagging deflation.

Abe came to power in December 2012 vowing to reverse the prolonged and debilitating decline in consumer prices that has plagued Japan's economy on and off for years.

Bank of Japan Governor Haruhiko Kuroda has used unconventional tools, including massive buying of government bonds and, since January, a negative interest rate, in efforts to boost prices and spur the world's third-largest economy.

But Friday's data offered fresh evidence of the challenges faced by the government and BoJ, which says its forecast 2.0 percent inflation rate will not now be reached until next year. It originally said this would happen in 2015.

Pakistan, Iran aim to boost trade to $5b

REUTERS, Islamabad

PAKISTAN and Iran aim to increase annual trade volumes between the two countries to $5 billion by 2021, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said on Saturday.

Sharif spoke at a business conference with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who arrived in Islamabad on Friday for two-day talks focused on increasing Pakistan's electricity imports from Iran, boosting trade relations and reviving plans for a gas pipeline between the two countries.

"In the five years strategic action plan signed yesterday we have aimed at boosting our bilateral trade to the level of US Dollars five billion by 2021," Sharif said.

"More land routes for trade on our border, trade exhibitions, industrial and agricultural cooperation and mutual recognition of standards will boost trade."

Trade between Pakistan and Iran fell to $432 million in 2010-11 from $1.32 billion in 2008-09, according to the Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, after western powers imposed sanctions on Tehran aimed at halting a nuclear programme they suspected was aimed at developing a nuclear bomb.

Most of the sanctions were lifted in January in return for Iran complying with a deal to curb its nuclear ambitions.

"Iran has the capability to help the development of the economic infrastructure of Pakistan including roads, railways dams and others area," Rouhani said in his speech at the Pakistan-Iran Business Forum.

Iran currently exports around 100 megawatts (MW) of electricity to the areas of Pakistan that border Iran. Pakistan is in the final stages of negotiating a deal that will increase that to 1,000 MW, the ministry of water and power has said previously.

Energy-starved Pakistan suffers about 12 hours of power cuts per day and is keen to import Iranian oil, gas, iron and steel.

Iran is interested in Pakistani textiles, surgical goods, sports goods and agricultural products.

Pakistan also plans to set up industrial sites in the impoverished border area, especially petrochemical storage, and link the infrastructure to a $46 billion project with China dubbed the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

AFP

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, *right*, speaks with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad yesterday.

Myanmar launches first shares on fledgling bourse

AFP, Yangon

MYANMAR launched its first stock exchange with just one listed company Friday in the hopes of boosting the country's economy as it emerges from decades of isolationist military rule.

The Southeast Asian nation is in the midst of a dramatic transition from a graft-soaked backwater to a vibrant emerging economy, with Aung San Suu Kyi's party days away from forming a civilian government.

The Yangon Stock Exchange officially opened for trading, 20 years after it had first been conceived, with the clang of a bell and cheers from a business elite who are hungry for investment. Maung Maung Thein, head of Myanmar's Securities and Exchange Commission, said it marked a "great day" for the country, which would now leave the tiny club of nations without a functioning stock exchange.

"We can now proudly and mightily proclaim to the world that we are no longer a backward nation," he told an assembled crowd of business leaders at the YSX's restored colonial era building in downtown Yangon.

Suu Kyi's incoming government will next week replace a transitional administration of retired generals who oversaw five years of political and economic reforms that pumped life back into the resource-rich country of 51 million people.

But significant hurdles lie ahead in a nation that still lacks a credit rating and is grappling with entrenched corruption and widespread poverty.

YSX started trading with just a single firm, First Myanmar Investment, which is one of the country's largest companies with stakes in financial services, real estate, aviation and health industries.

With its sister firm Yoma Strategic Holdings listed in Singapore, and with around 6,800 shareholders through an in-house system, FMI already has experience of stock trading and open investor relations, a rarity in Myanmar.

According to the YSX official website shares closed on Friday up 19.2 percent at a value of 31,000 kyat ($25.6), with a trading volume of 112,845 shares.

"We look forward to a buoyant economy and we look forward to a robust Yangon Stock Exchange that will help many companies in Myanmar access capital and build their companies," said Myanmar tycoon Serge Pun, who runs FMI, at the opening ceremony.

Several other firms have been granted provisional approval to list, including the Japan-backed Thilawa Special Economic Zone, but have yet to finalise their preparations.

State-owned Myanma Economic Bank has a controlling 51 percent stake in YSX, with the remainder divided between Japanese partners the Japan Exchange Group and Daiwa Institute of Research.

The bourse is currently open only to domestic investors and firms, although there are plans to allow foreign involvement in the future.

Officials hope to attract between 30 and 50 firms to list in the next five years.

REUTERS

People wait at Yangon Stock Exchange in Yangon, Myanmar.

Microsoft meets with private equity over Yahoo deal

REUTERS, Healdsburg, California

Microsoft Corp executives are in early talks with potential Yahoo Inc investors about contributing to financing to buy the troubled Internet company, a person familiar with the situation said.

The talks are preliminary, the person added, and Microsoft is focused on preserving the relationship between the two companies. Microsoft and Yahoo have longstanding search and advertising agreements.

Private equity firms interested in Yahoo approached Microsoft, the person added. Microsoft declined to comment.

Yahoo is auctioning its core Internet business, which includes search, mail and news sites. The faded Internet pioneer has been struggling to keep up with Alphabet Inc's Google and Facebook Inc in the battle for online advertisers.

Verizon's Chief Financial Officer Fran Shammo said in December that the U.S. wireless carrier could look at buying Yahoo's core business if it was a good fit.

Activist hedge fund Starboard Value LP moved on Thursday to overthrow the entire board of Yahoo, including Chief Executive Marissa Mayer, who has struggled to turn the company around in her nearly four years at the helm.

Microsoft's interest in Yahoo comes nearly a decade after another approach. In 2008, then-CEO Steve Ballmer tried unsuccessfully to buy Yahoo for about $45 billion. Website Re/code previously reported meetings between Microsoft and investors.

British EU exit campaign backed by 250 business leaders

REUTERS, London

THE campaign for Britain to leave the EU has been backed by 250 business leaders including the former chief executive of HSBC, the Vote Leave group said on Saturday, hoping to counter the view that UK businesses back staying in the bloc.

The camps arguing for and against Britain staying in the European Union ahead of a referendum on British membership on June 23 have both made the economic impact of a 'Brexit' a cornerstone of their campaigns.

Last month, the bosses at more than a third of Britain's biggest companies including oil giants Shell and BP, and its largest telecoms group BT said leaving the EU would put jobs and investment at risk.

On Saturday, Vote Leave, one of the groups supporting a British exit, unveiled its own list of backers including Michael Geoghegan, former Chief Executive of HSBC Group, John Caudwell, founder of Phones4U and Tim Martin, the boss of pubs group JD Wetherspoon.

"With our growing list of business supporters, Vote Leave will make that case that whilst the EU might be good for big multinationals, for smaller businesses it acts as a job destruction regulatory machine," Matthew Elliott, Chief Executive of Vote Leave, said.

Vote Leave also said it was forming a Business Council to argue that EU membership was holding back business.

That group will be headed by John Longworth who quit as director general of the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) lobbying group after he spoke out in favor of leaving the EU, accusing Prime Minister David Cameron of trying to scare voters into backing his case to stay in the bloc.

Meanwhile the Times newspaper reported that hedge funds were planning to use exit polls to make big profits on the day of the referendum.

Under electoral law, it is illegal to publish the results of such polls while people are still voting but a private poll could allow traders to exploit moves in the currency market, with sterling expected to rise sharply against the dollar on the back of an "In" vote but decline if Britons vote for an EU exit.

Sterling fell to multi-year lows this week on a perceived rise in the chances of an EU exit, and on companies and fund investors hedging against it, though the currency later steadied.

"There is a lot of interest around Brexit, particularly from the big U.S. funds," one unnamed broker told the Times.

The odds of a Brexit narrowed on Tuesday as the Brussels bombings were seen boosting the 'Out' campaign.