

'It kills me inside'

Activists sound alarm on climate anxiety over world's inaction

AFP, Hong Kong

From Bangladesh to Britain to Nigeria, many young campaigners on the frontlines of the global fight for climate justice now face a new problem: the impact the crisis is having on their mental health.

As thousands of delegates converged at the COP26 summit in Glasgow to discuss ways to tackle the environmental emergency, AFP interviewed three youth activists around the world who spoke candidly of their experience of climate anxiety.

In Bangladesh, ranked seventh for countries most affected by extreme weather, activist Sohanur Rahman said he feels overwhelmed with concern over what he sees as a lack of political will to stop the destruction.

"(The) climate crisis is to me a mental stress, trauma and nightmare," says the 24-year-old, who now lives in the town of Barisal and who remembers a 2007 super cyclone that killed thousands of people in the South Asian nation.

"It kills me inside," he says softly, adding that he fears for his parents who live in the village of Nathullabad that was levelled by the cyclone.

The American Psychological Association has described climate or eco-anxiety as a "chronic fear of environmental doom".

As with other forms of anxiety, living with it long-term can impair people's daily ability to function, while exacerbating underlying mental health issues.

Researchers have warned children and young people are particularly vulnerable, as they contemplate a future mired with scorching heatwaves, devastating floods and storms, and rising seas.

A recent report led by researchers at the University of Bath in Britain, surveying 10,000 young people in 10 countries, found that 77 percent viewed the future as frightening



because of climate change. Around half of the respondents told researchers their fears over environmental change were affecting their daily lives.

Speaking to AFP in London, activist Dominique Palmer said: "I'm looking at the future, and what we face in the future, and there is a lot of fear and anxiety. And there is anger."

"Young people, myself included, feel betrayed by world leaders," the 22-year-old said at a climate protest ahead of the COP26 summit.

In the eyes of many young activists, that concrete action is lacking. At the COP26 summit, dozens of countries this week joined a United States and European Union pledge to cut methane emissions. It was followed by an agreement by 100 nations to end deforestation by 2030.

But a simmering diplomatic spat between the United States, China and Russia over their climate action ambitions showed the fragile nature of the talks.

"We bear the burden of climate change, even though we contributed the least to it," eco-feminist Jennifer Uchendu, 29, in Lagos.



PHOTO: REUTERS

YOUTH PROTEST AT COP26

Demonstrators holding placards attend the Fridays for Future march during the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), in Glasgow, Scotland, Britain, yesterday. Thousands of young campaigners marched through the streets of Glasgow yesterday to demand that world leaders safeguard their future against climate change.

Progress made, but not enough

AFP, Glasgow

With science warning that only swift action can avoid catastrophic global warming, countries already feeling the lash of climate change are demanding that the timetable for updating national carbon-cutting pledges be radically accelerated.

Currently, the nearly 200 nations that submitted voluntary emissions reduction schemes under the 2015 Paris Agreement have agreed to update those plans every five years, a process described as a "ratchet mechanism".

The first set of revisions came due at the end of 2020, but most were not submitted until this year because of the Covid pandemic.

China, by far the world's top carbon polluter, filed its update only last week, and India -- the number four emitter -- did so at the COP26 summit in Glasgow on Monday.

But even if all national pledges are honoured -- a big "if" -- Earth's surface would still warm a "catastrophic" 2.7 degrees above pre-industrial levels, according to the UN, a far cry from the Paris treaty target of 1.5C.

The next scheduled rendezvous for upping ambition isn't until 2025.

Sobering projections, however, from the UN's science authority along with a crescendo of unprecedented heatwaves, flooding and wildfires, strongly suggest this is not soon enough.

Leading the charge for a more compressed timetable is UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

"Let's have no illusions," he said on the opening day of the talks. "If commitments fall short by the end of the COP, countries must revisit their national climate plans and policies. Not every five years. Every year, until keeping 1.5C is assured."

The idea got further backing on Thursday from Bangladeshi Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, who said "major emitters" should raise their 2030 targets at every annual climate conference until they are aligned with the 1.5C goal.

Various proposals for including a call for nations to review and improve plans to shrink their carbon footprints are already "on the table" in preliminary discussions among negotiators, according several sources at the talks.

A first draft -- known as a "non-paper" in UN climate jargon -- could be circulated as early as Friday, they said.

NATIONAL CARBON-CUTTING PLEDGES

» Nearly 200 nations have submitted voluntary emissions reduction schemes

» Even if all national pledges are honoured, Earth's surface would still warm a "catastrophic" 2.7 degrees

» More than 50 developing countries have called for a pact that would mandate yearly ambition raising for governments

Momentum has been building on the issue.

More than 50 developing countries in the Climate Vulnerable Forum, have called for a pact that would "mandate yearly ambition raising for governments, and especially major carbon emitters for every year through to 2025".

"It depends on the language," said Alden Meyer, a senior associate at climate policy think tank E3G.

"If it sounds like it's mandatory, then China and other countries will say that is re-interpreting the Paris Agreement -- which is correct."

While signatories are collectively enjoined to reach the treaty's temperature targets, individual contributions are strictly on a voluntary basis.

A call for yearly updates would also run into a practical problem, analysts pointed out. It took years of internal wrangling before the European Union succeeded in increasing its 2030 target for greenhouse reduction from 40 to 55 percent, compared to 1990 levels.

Trying to do that every year -- whether in the EU, the United States or Japan -- would be nearly impossible, they suggest.

A more realistic goal would be picking an interim year by which nations would be asked to submit new plans on a voluntary basis.

"Most people have been talking about 2023," said Meyer.



A couple poses during a pre-wedding photo shoot near India's Presidential Palace which is shrouded in smog, in New Delhi, India, yesterday. New Delhi woke up to a thick blanket of toxic smog yesterday after an overnight barrage of firecrackers for the festival of Diwali in the Indian megacity, despite a ban on selling them.

PHOTO: REUTERS

POLLUTION DUE TO INCREASED USE OF COAL

Beijing shuts roads, playgrounds

AFP, Beijing

Highways and school playgrounds in Beijing were closed yesterday due to heavy pollution, as China ramps up coal production and faces scrutiny of its environmental record at make-or-break international climate talks.

China -- the world's largest emitter of the greenhouse gases responsible for climate change -- has ramped up coal output after supply chains in recent months were roiled by an energy crunch owing to strict emissions targets and record prices for the fossil fuel.

A thick haze of smog blanketed swathes of northern China yesterday, with visibility in some areas reduced to less than 200 metres (yards), according to the country's weather forecaster.

Schools in the capital -- which will host the Winter Olympics in February -- were ordered to stop physical education classes and outdoor activities.

Stretches of highways to major cities including Shanghai, Tianjin and Harbin

were closed due to poor visibility.

Pollutants detected yesterday by a monitoring station at the US embassy in Beijing reached levels defined as "very unhealthy" for the general population.

Authorities in Beijing blamed the pollution on a combination of "unfavourable weather conditions and regional pollution spread" and said the smog was likely to persist until at least today evening.

But the "root cause of smog in north China is fossil fuel burning," said Greenpeace East Asia climate and energy manager Danqing Li.

China generates about 60 percent of its energy from burning coal.

China has increased coal output to ease an energy shortage that had forced factories to close in recent months.

Average daily coal production in the middle of October was 1.1 million tonnes higher than the end of September, according to a Sunday statement by the country's top economic planning body.

AFP, Brisbane

Coral bleaching has affected 98 percent of Australia's Great Barrier Reef since 1998, leaving just a fraction of the world's largest reef system untouched, according to a study published yesterday.

The paper in the peer-reviewed journal Current Biology found that just two percent of the vast underwater ecosystem had escaped impacts since the first mass coral bleaching event in 1998 -- then the world's hottest year ever, a record that has repeatedly been broken as climate change accelerates.

Lead author Terry Hughes, from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at James Cook University, said the frequency, intensity and scale of climate-fuelled marine heatwaves that cause coral bleaching are increasing.

"Five bouts of mass bleaching since 1998 have turned the Great Barrier Reef into a checkerboard of reefs with very different recent histories, ranging from two percent of reefs that have escaped

bleaching altogether, to 80 percent that have now bleached severely at least once since 2016," he said.

Bleaching occurs when healthy corals become stressed by spikes in ocean temperatures, causing them to expel algae living in their tissues which drains them of their vibrant colours.

The Great Barrier Reef has suffered three mass bleaching events during heatwaves in 2016, 2017 and 2020, leaving many affected corals struggling to survive.

Government scientists said in July that corals have shown some signs of recovery since the last bleaching but admit the long-term outlook for the 2,300-kilometre-long (1,400-mile-long) ecosystem is "very poor".

The reef is also susceptible to harm from cyclones and outbreaks of crown-of-thorns starfish, which eat the coral, with both factors becoming more damaging due to climate change.

The research found corals that had previously been exposed to heatwaves were less susceptible to heat stress, but co-author Sean Connolly, from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, warned more frequent and severe bleaching would reduce the reef's resilience.

"Corals still need time to recover before another round of heat stress so they can make babies that will disperse, settle and recover the depleted parts of the reef," he said.

"Action to curb climate change is crucial."

Coral bleaching impacts 98pc of it

GREAT BARRIER REEF



THIS DAY IN HISTORY

NOVEMBER 06

1813 - Chilpancingo congress declares Mexico independent of Spain.

1860 - Abraham Lincoln of Illinois elected the 16th President of the US.

1913 - Mahatma Gandhi arrested for leading Indian miners' march in South Africa.

1917 - Bolshevik revolution begins with bombardment of the Winter Palace in Petrograd during the Russian October Revolution.

SOURCE: WEBSITES