

UN climate change report spells out growing dangers

Fred Mazelis
7 April 2014

The report issued last week by the United Nations-chartered Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) underscores the gravity of a crisis that is already having its effects in every corner of the globe.

The 2,500-page assessment, issued in Yokohama, Japan, is the first full report of its kind since 2007. The product of 66 main authors and bearing the signatures of 271 officials from 115 different countries, it sets the stage for a 2015 climate change conference charged with working toward drastic limitations of greenhouse gas emissions on an internationally coordinated basis.

Despite the predictable noises of support by leaders of the major industrial powers, including President Barack Obama, there were no signs that this report would be followed by serious action, much less the planned international response that is required to defend the very future of life on earth.

Although the poor countries and populations in low-lying and coastal areas face the most immediate consequences of global warming, the report made absolutely clear that large urban areas in the wealthier northern hemisphere have also already begun to experience the costs of inaction. In the words of the chairman of the panel, Rajendra Pachauri, “Nobody on this planet is going to be untouched by the impacts of climate change.”

“It’s not the case that we in the rich world are protected and they in the poor world are not,” said the co-chairman of the group that drafted the report. “You just have to look at Hurricane Sandy to get a picture of that.”

Among the panel’s predictions are increased inland flooding of the sort that has already been seen in the US and elsewhere in the developed world. While extreme cold will be a less frequent cause of premature deaths, this will be more than made up for by the consequences

of extreme heat waves, a phenomenon that has also begun to be seen in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

Flooding will wipe out homes, businesses, water treatment centers and power plants, with huge impacts on economic activity and daily life.

The report pointed to the results of changing rainfall patterns. Droughts in many areas will lead to a shortage of safe drinking water. Storms will damage the infrastructure. Food production will be increasingly affected, with a prediction that it could fall by 2 percent per decade in the coming period.

Corn and wheat yields are already affected. Fisheries are also endangered, with a redistribution that negatively affects the economies of countries around the equator and those in polar regions.

The poor, the young and the elderly, including in the richest countries, will be the most vulnerable. The report warned of new “poverty traps” for billions of people, particularly in South Asia and Southeast Asia, who find their path blocked by the irreversible results of climate change.

In the heavily understated words of the report: “Throughout the 21st century, climate-change impacts are projected to slow down economic growth, make poverty reduction more difficult, further erode food security, and prolong existing and create new poverty traps, the latter particularly in urban areas and emerging hot spots of hunger.”

Another of the report’s authors, Michael Oppenheimer of Princeton University, was more direct. “When some people don’t have food, you get starvation,” he told the *New York Times*. “Yes, I’m worried.”

A major theme of the latest assessment is the danger of social instability and violence brought on by food

and water shortages in parts of the world. The global implications of this deepening social crisis were also mentioned.

Saleemul Haq, a Bangladeshi scientist who was one of the authors of the report, said, “The really scary impacts are when things start getting together globally. If you have a crisis in two or three places around the world, suddenly it’s not a local crisis. It’s a global crisis and the repercussions of things going bad in several different places are very severe.”

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world and one of the poorest. It is among the most vulnerable to flooding caused by heavy rains and a rise in the sea level.

The IPCC report inevitably reflected the tensions between rival capitalist nations, as well as the resistance among the major imperialist powers to an increase in assistance to the world’s poorest peoples, who have already suffered the consequences of generations of imperialist exploitation. A figure of \$100 billion needed annually by the poor countries to deal with climate change was included in the main report, but left out of the 48-page executive summary at the insistence of the US and several other imperialist nations, obviously in order to discourage any call for additional aid.

Another major theme of the IPCC was the need for adaptation, which observers said represented a shift from the period when talk of adapting to climate change was considered a way of avoiding the urgent task of reducing greenhouse emissions.

The *Atlantic* magazine emphasized this aspect, pointing out that the early reports of the IPCC, which was first launched in 1988, barely mentioned adaptation, but that had increasingly changed in recent years. The 2007 assessment devoted two pages to “adaptation options,” the *Atlantic* reports, while the latest study allocates four chapters to the subject.

While adaptation to changes that have taken place or are irreversible is clearly an urgent necessity, it can be used to justify abandoning the poorest and most vulnerable in a form of environmental triage. It can also be used to arrive at compromises with right-wing climate change deniers, softening the already timid measures that have been taken to mitigate global warming. In the words of the *Atlantic* article, “...adaptation measures are less politicized than

mitigation measures.”

Adaptation is also being looked on as a new source of profit. Again, in the words of the *Atlantic*, “...preparing for the worst actually presents major opportunities for the private sector.” Quoting from the report and its emphasis on the “private sector,” the *Atlantic* writers argue that “individuals and communities need to show entrepreneurial initiative and figure out how best to survive in an increasingly volatile climate.”

What the actual science of the report spells out, however, is the need for a comprehensive international plan. Presently, the division of the world into competing capitalist nation-states and rival imperialist powers exacerbates the dangers of climate change and makes impossible any serious struggle to alleviate them. The problem is not fundamentally one of poor nations against rich nations, or a lack of resources, but of the working class against the bankrupt capitalist system.

Democratic planning on socialist foundations, not “entrepreneurial initiative,” would make it possible to deal with the growing consequences of climate change, ending the exploitation of the poorer countries in such a way that all would benefit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact