

World must fix climate in less than 10 years: U.N.

By Raymond Colitt

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Unless the international community agrees to cut carbon emissions by half over the next generation, climate change is likely to cause large-scale human and economic setbacks and irreversible ecological catastrophes, a U.N. report said on Tuesday.

The U.N. Human Development Report issued one of the strongest warnings yet of the lasting impact of climate change on living standards and a strong call for urgent collective action.

"We could be on the verge of seeing human development reverse for the first time in 30 years," Kevin Watkins, lead author of the report, told Reuters.

The report, presented in Brasilia on Tuesday, sets targets and a road map to reduce carbon emissions before a U.N. climate summit next month in Bali, Indonesia.

Emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere help trap heat and lead to global warming.

"The message for Bali is the world cannot afford to wait. It has less than a decade to change course," said Watkins, a senior research fellow at Britain's Oxford University.

Dangerous climate change will be unavoidable if in the next 15 years emissions follow the same trend as the past 15 years, the report said.

To avoid catastrophic impact, the rise in global temperature must be limited to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit (2 degrees Celsius). But carbon emissions mostly from cars and power plants are twice the level needed to meet that target, the U.N. authors said.

Climate change threatens to condemn millions of people to poverty, the UNDP said. Climate disasters between 2000 and 2004 affected 262 million people, 98 percent of them in the developing world. The poor are often forced to sell productive assets or save on food, health, and education, creating "life-long cycles of disadvantage."

HOMES, FOOD, WATER IMPERILED

A temperature rise of between 5.4 and 7.2 degrees Fahrenheit (3 and 4 degrees Celsius) would displace 340 million people through flooding, droughts would diminish farm output, and retreating glaciers would cut off drinking water from as many as 1.8 billion people, the report said.

In Kenya, children 5 or younger are 50 percent more likely to be malnourished if they were born

during a drought year, affecting their life-long health and productivity.

Countries have the technical ability and financial resources to tackle climate change, the report says.

"What is missing is a sense of urgency and human solidarity -- I hope that emerges in Bali," UNDP head Kemal Dervis said at a ceremony attended by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

The report singled out the United States and Australia as the only major Western economies not to sign the Kyoto Protocol, an agreement signed by 172 countries to reduce emissions. It expires in 2012.

Ethiopia emits 0.1 metric tons of carbon dioxide per capita, compared to 20 metric tons in Canada. U.S. per capita emissions are more than 15 times those of India.

The world needs to spend 1.6 percent of global economic output annually through 2030 to stabilize the carbon stock and meet the 3.6-degree Fahrenheit temperature target, the UNDP said. Rich countries, the biggest carbon emitters, should lead the way and cut emissions at least 30 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050. Developing nations should cut emissions 20 percent by 2050, it said.

"When people in an American city turn on their air conditioning or people in Europe drive their cars, their actions have consequences ... linking them to rural communities in Bangladesh, farmers in Ethiopia and slum dwellers in Haiti," the report said.

The UNDP recommended measures including improved energy efficiency for appliances and cars, taxes or caps on emissions, and the ability to trade allowances to emit more. It said an experimental technology to store carbon emissions underground was promising for the coal industry and suggested technology transfer to coal-dependent developing countries like China.

Asked whether the report was alarmist, Watkins said it was based on science and evidence. "I defy anybody to speak to the victims of droughts and floods, like we did, and challenge our conclusions on the long-term impact of climate disasters," he said.

(Editing by Bill Trott)