

Calling it what it is: Climate Emergency



By **Tharanya Arumugam** - September 18, 2022 @ 10:56am



Homes are surrounded by floodwaters in Sohbat Pur city, a district of Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province. - AP Pic

NEW YORK: United Nations secretary-general Antonio Guterres Wednesday painted a fairly grim picture of the future should countries continue to ignore warnings or delay sustainable climate actions, following his recent visit to flood-hit Pakistan.

"Unless action is taken now, unless funds are disbursed now, these tragedies will simply multiply, with devastating consequences for years to come, including instability and mass migration around the world," he said at a press briefing at UN headquarters here.

His message to world leaders who will gather here for the 77th UN General Assembly is clear: "Lower the temperature — now. Don't flood the world today; don't drown it tomorrow".

Noting that the world's wealthiest nations are responsible for 80 per cent of climate-related emissions, Guterres called upon the G20 to lead the way in cutting emissions and limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C.

"G20 countries are also suffering the impact of record droughts, fires and floods - but climate action seems to be flatlining."

"If one-third of G20 countries was under water today (instead of Pakistan), as it could be tomorrow, perhaps they would find it easier to agree on drastic cuts to emissions," he wondered.

Guterres described his two-day visit to Pakistan as looking through a window into the "future of permanent and ubiquitous climate chaos on an unimaginable scale."

"It is simply heart-breaking. No picture can convey the scope of this catastrophe. The flooded area is three times the size of my entire country, Portugal," the former Portuguese prime minister said.



United Nations secretary-general Antonio Guterres. - EPA Pic

Devastating floods have claimed lives, washed away homes and crops, and left millions of people stranded in Pakistan. More than one third of the country was under water and over 1,300 people have died since the monsoon season began in June.

Guterres, who had made climate change his signature issue since he assumed office in 2017, has not minced words about the climate crisis - from calling it "a code red for humanity" to describing it as "collective suicide" if countries do not work on multilateralism and collaboration in tackling the crisis.

In 2020, the UN chief called on countries to declare a climate emergency until the world reaches net zero carbon emissions.

Experts who spoke to the New Straits Times agreed that while governments are committed to climate action, it is equally crucial to call the crisis what it is - an emergency.

What are the caveats that come with the term "emergency"? Would declaring an emergency affect the economy of a country such as Malaysia which aspires to join the ranks of other leading and developed economies? How likely is it that countries will declare an emergency and do nothing about it?

Dr Renard Siew, a sustainability and climate change specialist; Associate Professor Dr Matthew Ashfold, head of the school of environmental and geographical sciences, University of Nottingham, Malaysia; and Professor Dr Yeah Kim Leng, director of economic studies programme of the Jeffrey Cheah Institute on Southeast Asia weighed in.

'THE SCIENCE IS EXTREMELY CLEAR'

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that unless climate action is taken immediately, temperatures may rise by 2.7°C by the end of the century, affecting economies and people directly.

As seen by increasing frequency and intensity of extreme flooding in Asia, wildfires in Europe, heatwaves in the US, and severe droughts in Africa in recent years, "rare extreme events" are already becoming the "new normal".

Belgium, for instance, described the 2021 floods as "one of the greatest natural disasters (the) country has ever known." The European Union said "the scale of the wildfire destruction this year would be the worst since records began in 2006." US scientists sounded the alarm that "heatwaves are getting bigger, longer and extend across larger swaths of land."

Malaysia's floods in December 2021, a result of one-in-100-year heavy rainfall, served as a stark warning for urgent climate action.

Malaysian Climate Emergency Coalition ([GDIMY](#)) on April 20 urged the government to declare a [climate emergency](#) by Malaysia Day to address the country's response to the global climate crisis.



Environment and Water Minister Datuk Seri Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man -
.NSTP/L.MANIMARAN

Environment and Water Minister Datuk Seri Tuan Ibrahim Tuan Man, however, on Aug 4 said the government does not need to declare an emergency yet since climate actions are underway.

Tuan Ibrahim said Malaysia had committed to reducing the intensity of GHG emissions without conditions as well as achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob had earlier said the government will take [three actions](#) to strengthen the country's resilience and prepare for floods and climate change.

UNPACKING CLIMATE EMERGENCY

According to a 2021 United Nations Development Programme survey of 1.2 million respondents from 50 countries, 64 percent of them believe climate change is a global emergency.

Oxford Dictionaries define "climate emergency" as "a situation in which urgent action is required to reduce or halt climate change and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage resulting from it".

"Climate emergency is usually used to emphasise the need for urgent and significant action to avoid increasingly dangerous climate change," Ashfold said.

Malaysia, he said has been much too slow in its efforts to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, with more attention paid to future risks and emission reduction targets set decades in the future.

"The thinking behind this mooted declaration is that a recognised state of 'emergency' ought to drive more immediate action."

By way of comparison, Ashfold said people did see unprecedented, urgent action – such as imposed movement restrictions – during the Covid-19 pandemic when an emergency was perceived.

Yeah said the declaration initiative merits consideration by the government, if not at the national level, then at the state or district jurisdictions that have or are confronting environmental disasters and climate risks.

An emergency declaration will focus national attention and mobilise the whole-of-government (WOG) and whole-of-society (WOS) to address climate threats, he said, adding that it will give greater impetus to strengthening climate policies and mobilising climate actions.

Yeah, however, did not dismiss the possibility of an emergency declaration that might not result in a call-to-action urgency especially if the country is plagued by other more pressing challenges such as economic stagnation, social unrest and political turmoil.

Siew bluntly said it is time to acknowledge climate change as an emergency situation, as Malaysia is already experiencing the brunt of climate impacts (floods and droughts).

"This declaration emphasises the seriousness of the situation. Coordinated efforts are needed to address this emergency.

"About eight countries have declared climate emergencies and there appears to be a trend towards more concrete follow up action."

Citing Argentina as an example, he said upon an emergency declaration, their legislation establishes strategic measures, instruments and plans to mitigate climate change. There is also a minimum budget for environmental conservation and protection.

Siew, however, said unless a declaration is followed by "declared action", it will simply be a "lip service".

As of [August 2022](#), 2,268 jurisdictions in 39 countries have declared a climate emergency. Populations covered by jurisdictions that have declared a climate emergency amount to over one billion citizens.

RADICAL CLIMATE ACTION

Among the many climate contrarian claims, some contend that climate solutions will not work because they are harmful, ineffective, or too difficult to implement. Others argue that environmentalists and media are alarmists. But climate activists continue to push for seemingly unattainable goals, so why do they do so?

Using the saying - 'shoot for the moon because even if you miss, you will land amongst the stars', Siew explained that goals should be ambitious as it keeps people striving and inspired to do better.

The Malaysian economy needs an urgent "economic reset" that will deliver an inclusive, lasting recovery through action towards a just and sustainable future, he added.

"Therefore, the government should also develop a New Green Deal that pays special attention to industry transformation, renewable energy, transportation and forests."



Dr

Renard Siew - NSTP/ROHANIS SHUKRI

On the possible enactment of a Climate Change Act, Siew said it needs to be comprehensive and cover all key economic areas.

Despite increasing attention to climate change action in Malaysia, Ashfold stressed the need for more urgent action, as in most countries.

"As an illustration, Malaysia's current Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) commits to a 45 per cent reduction in emission intensity of GDP by 2030, relative to 2005.

"With an anticipated tripling of GDP over this 25-year period, the reduction in intensity can be achieved even if actual emissions continue to grow considerably up to 2030.

"By contrast, the (GDIMY) climate emergency declaration cites research indicating Malaysia's emissions should be falling by 2030 to contribute to achieving the Paris Agreement goals in a way considered to be 'fair'."

Ashfold also noted one specific example of a political challenge in reducing emissions is renewed debate on the current blanket petrol subsidy, which keeps prices down for consumers, but incentivises private vehicle use over lower-emitting transport options.

"This vehicle usage results in the transport sector being the second largest contributor to Malaysia's emissions, after electricity generation.

"The finance minister has stated this subsidy could cost the government RM30 billion over the course of 2022, and largely benefits the most well-off, who are effectively paid more to use more petrol.

"Pathways towards achieving the Paris Agreement goals show that urgent action to address this challenge, of how best to remove costly blanket fossil fuel subsidies, is required."

Yeah said there is sufficient scientific evidence to attest to the efficacy of climate solutions, although the probability of being inadequate or biased continues to plague researchers and policy makers.

"The search for optimal solutions will continue as climate research progresses. There is hope that continuing advances in science and technology and whole-of-society approach will win over the sceptics and pessimists holding to the 'unattainable goals' beliefs."

INVEST IN CLIMATE ADAPTATION, NOT JUST MITIGATION

Researchers have noted that a major drawback to many climate emergency declarations around the world is that they tend to focus on mitigation policies like green housing and carbon offsetting, whereas fewer than 12 per cent of declarations talk about climate adaptation.

Questions about the practical impact of climate emergency declarations sometimes concern a narrow focus on reducing emissions, which could come at the expense of other important goals, such as reducing poverty and improving health, Ashfold said.

However, he said the 12 areas outlined in the proposed declaration for Malaysia are far more comprehensive – recognising the equal need to adapt to the impacts of climate change, emphasising related challenges on food and water security, and appreciating the fundamental importance of preserving biodiversity and Malaysian ecosystems.

"Another practical question is whether we could conceive of an end to a climate emergency?"

Even in the most optimistic scenario, Ashfold said it will take decades to address climate change fully, reach zero emissions globally, and ensure global resilience to climatic hazards.

Malaysia had on June 21 announced that a National Adaptation Plan relating to the impact of climate change, which will include a long-term action plan and strategies for various sectors will be formulated.

Yeah said the suggested policy actions are wide-ranging and a more detailed assessment needs to be undertaken to ascertain the potential impact of the emergency declaration commitments.

"Further dialogues between the proponents, government and stakeholders are needed to resolve differences in policy actions.

"This includes the establishment of a carbon trading market by Bursa Malaysia and various ongoing and planned development projects that impinge on the natural ecosystem and environment.

"Overall, a careful analysis of the socio-economic impact and eco-system accounting needs to be done to better inform national policy makers and planners."

Yeah added that Malaysia's post-climate emergency declaration should give due emphasis to adaptive and resilient strategies and actions.

It is therefore essential that the economy be guided towards green investment and green growth opportunities in order to realise balanced, equitable, and sustainable development while enhancing its resilience to climate risks, environmental disasters, and irreversible biodiversity losses, he said.



Professor Dr Yeah Kim Leng - Pic courtesy

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Yeah, however, acknowledged that this collective cry for radical climate action and climate emergency declaration could have unintended consequences such as scaring away investors, stalling development activities and diverting resources away from other equally critical spending such as healthcare and education.

Therefore, he said, it is imperative to outline the scope and limits of the emergency declaration and to ascertain beforehand the costs, benefits, and potential effects on social and economic activities.

He noted that many of the proposed actions under the emergency declaration are aligned with the government's current thrusts, including the 12th Malaysia Plan, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development initiatives, and various environmental management plans.

G20 TO MOBILISE CLIMATE FINANCE

According to a 2020 study published in the Lancet Planetary Health, countries classified by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as Annex I nations (most industrialised countries) were responsible for 90 per cent of excess emissions.

The Global North was collectively responsible for 92 per cent. By contrast, they study found that most countries in the Global South were within their boundary fair shares, including India.

These figures indicate that high-income countries evidently bear a greater degree of responsibility for climate damages.

As recently reaffirmed at the Bonn Climate Change Conference in June, developing countries expect the upcoming Conference of the Parties (COP 27) to be held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt to establish a finance facility for loss and damage. They want to be compensated for what the rich world has unleashed through their addictions to fossil fuels.

"The reality on the ground is that the Global South continues to face one of the worst climate impacts today. Thus, they require financial resources to build resilience, hence the proposal to focus on 'loss and damage'," Siew said.

Additionally, issues such as illegal logging and deforestation are further exacerbating the situation and should be dealt with properly, he said.

Siew added that the climate crisis should also be on the agenda in the 15th General Election campaign.

"For the likes of Greta Thunberg and younger climate activists, the argument put forth is clear, there is simply no future or economy on a dead planet.

"Hence, the importance of ensuring that leaders voted in truly care and are pushing for transformative policies that puts people and planet on the agenda."



Photo taken on July 17, 2022, meltwater flows from the Greenland ice sheet into the Baffin Bay near Pituffik, Greenland.- AFP Pic

Guterres reminded wealthy G20 nations responsible for bulk of emissions to step up with funds required for adaptation, including building flood-resilient infrastructure in Global South nations.

"What is happening in Pakistan demonstrates the sheer inadequacy of the global response to the climate crisis, and the betrayal and injustice at the heart of it.

"Whether it is Pakistan, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, small islands or Least Developed Countries, the world's most vulnerable – who did nothing to cause this crisis – are paying a horrific price for decades of intransigence by big emitters," Guterres said.

Ashfold noted that there is no doubt that Global North countries, and most prominently the US, have contributed the most to the accumulation of historical emissions which cause global warming.

At the same time, Ashfold said simply splitting countries into these two categories, "North" and "South", hides a lot of diversity and nuance – for example, Malaysia's average per person emissions are around 15 times higher than Malawi's.

"And one recent study says Malaysia is among the few Global South nations to have 'overshot' its fair share of carbon emissions."