

UN: Climate Change May Cost \$20 Trillion

By JOHN HEILPRIN, Associated Press Writer

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

(01-30) 14:26 PST UNITED NATIONS, (AP) --

Global warming could cost the world up to \$20 trillion over two decades for cleaner energy sources and do the most harm to people who can least afford to adapt, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warns in a new report.

Ban's report provides an overview of U.N. climate efforts to help the 192-nation General Assembly prepare for a key two-day climate debate in mid-February. That debate is intended to shape overall U.N. policy on climate change, including how nations can adapt to a warmer world and ways of supporting the U.N.-led negotiations toward a new climate treaty by 2009, U.N. officials said Wednesday.

The treaty, replacing the Kyoto Protocol when it expires in 2012, could shape the course of climate change for decades to come. The Kyoto pact requires 37 industrial nations to reduce greenhouse gases by a relatively modest 5 percent on average.

Much of the focus has been on the United States, the only major industrial nation to reject the treaty, and on fast-developing nations such as China and India. Many are looking to next year, when a new U.S. president takes the White House. The leading contenders in both political parties favor doing more than the voluntary approaches and call for new technologies that President Bush espouses.

In his 52-page report, Ban says that global investments of \$15 trillion to \$20 trillion over the next 20 to 25 years may be required "to place the world on a markedly different and sustainable energy trajectory." Today, the global energy industry spends about \$300 billion a year in new plants, transmission networks and other new investment, according to U.N. figures.

Srgjan Kerim, a Macedonian diplomat and economics professor who is president of the U.N. General Assembly, told The Associated Press that cutting greenhouse gases alone will not be enough to pull island nations, sub-Saharan Africa and other particularly vulnerable parts of the world back from the brink of irreversible harm.

"Cutting emissions is a very important dimension, but that's not enough for this equation," Kerim said in an interview this week. "Inventing new technologies, renewable energies, investing more in research and development, is also a very viable way and remedy for resolving the problem."

In December, under the auspices of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, the 186 nations that attended a climate meeting in Bali, Indonesia, agreed on a "Bali Roadmap" of principles to craft a successor to the Kyoto treaty.

Last year, a Noble Prize-winning U.N. network of climate and other scientists warned of rising seas, droughts, severe weather and other dire consequences without sharp cutbacks in emissions of the industrial, transportation and agricultural gases blamed for warming.

That network, called the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, advised that emissions should be reduced by 25 percent to 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2020.

"Climate change and its implications is a broader process, more profound than negotiations among member states," Kerim said. "So our aim, our goal is to support that process, not to replace it."

Kerim said he wants to encourage partnerships between businesses and governments, and that he would refrain from encouraging nations to assign blame — and added responsibility — to the United States and other rich nations for their historical pollution.

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"To approach the issue must be a forward looking way," he said. "We have to now try to find a way out. And to find a way out, you don't look in the rear mirror which shows you the back of your car."

British billionaire Richard Branson, who has decided to invest heavily in "biofuels" along with his Virgin brand of several hundred companies, will be a special guest at the assembly meeting, Kerim said.

"He was one of the first who reacted and who said that he's prepared to finance projects for clean energies and technologies," Kerim said.

Like Ban, who told the AP in December that his No. 1 priority is persuading the world to agree to new controls on global warming gases before the end of 2009, Kerim calls the challenges of climate change "my flagship topic."

In his report, Ban warned that global warming would probably affect women more than men. "The challenge of climate change is unlikely to be gender-neutral, as it increases the risk to the most vulnerable and less empowered social groups," he said.

Annie Petsonk, a lawyer for the advocacy group Environmental Defense, said global warming will most affect poor people and minorities, because the wealthy can spend more to adapt. "Women in poorer communities are going to face greater challenges protecting their children from the spread of diseases, polluted water, water shortages and so on," she said.

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