



UN Climate change panel chair Pachauri: "We swim or sink together"

"We sink or swim together" - that was the message the UN's chief scientist on climate change brought to MEPs on Wednesday 25 March. India's Rajendra K. Pachauri is Chair of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) convened by the United Nations to forge a scientific consensus on global warming. We spoke to Dr. Pachauri before his visit to Parliament's temporary committee on climate change where he delivered a speech on climate change and global security.

Together with former US vice president Al Gore the panel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last December for their efforts to raise awareness of climate change.

Q. Climate change is perhaps the biggest security threat of today's world, greater than that of terrorism. The EU recently identified action against climate change as central to its security policy. What kind of security threats are we talking about?

Dr. Pachauri: Climate change is likely to result in problems with the availability of water across the globe. This is a result of changes in precipitation patterns and in melting of the glaciers in different parts of the world, and the demand for water is increasing. You could have several regions in the world with a conflict over natural resources like water.

Another threat could result from extreme events like floods, droughts and heat waves which we have projected will increase in frequency and in intensity. Also a large movement of population could impact on agriculture. Those regions of the world that don't produce enough food to meet their own needs, may have no choice but to move to other locations, and when that happens in large numbers, that clearly has the seeds of conflict in it.

I suppose the Norwegian Nobel Committee, when it gave the Peace Prize to the IPCC and Al Gore, must have seen that climate change can be a threat to peace and stability. There is no part of the globe that can be immune to the security threat. We need to be conscious of that.

Regarding melting glaciers - the so called "canary birds" of climate change: a huge ice chunk has just broken off from Antarctica. Why should we worry about glaciers and polar ice?

Dr. Pachauri: For a variety of reasons: in some parts of the world the stable supply of water into river systems comes from these glaciers, South Asia is one example, some parts of China another. So this could affect the very availability of water in these regions. The other problem with the melting of these ice bodies across the globe would

be sea level rise.

It is already taking place to some extent as a result of thermal expansion of the oceans with higher temperatures. But if the huge bodies of ice of western Antarctica and Greenland ice sheets, sitting on land, were to collapse, that would really mean several meters increase in sea level. It's very difficult to say if and when this will happen but the possibility certainly exists.

Q. Can technology help to stop global warming, and how?

Dr. Pachauri: Firstly we have to accept that there is certain inertia; even if we were to stabilize the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere at current levels, climate change would continue for several decades. Therefore in a sense we're not going to be able to stop global change, but to arrest its growth in the future. This makes it absolutely critical that we start reducing the emission of greenhouse gases by which the atmosphere and the climate of the earth can be stabilized.

Technology can certainly provide solutions to reduce emissions, but it comes into play only if we have the right set of policies. We need policies to promote the development of new technologies or the employment of the existing ones. We (the IPCC) have clearly stated in our report that the technology needed are already available or on the verge of being commercialised. These technologies will only be used if we have the right set of policies.

Suppose if governments would impose a tax on petroleum products; this would give the incentive to automobile companies to produce more efficient cars, also people could make more use of public transport. Pricing is an extremely important instrument to create change.

Q. What can Europe do to engage other international players in the effort to mitigate climate change?

Dr. Pachauri: It is very important to reach an agreement by 2009. Europe can lead by example. Mahatma Gandhi said; "to be the change you want to see in the world". I believe strongly in this. Europe is such a large and important entity that if you create an example of success this will motivate and inspire other regions of the world. Politically Europe would gain power as well. It thus has a very critical role in setting the pace for meeting this problem of climate change. It's wonderful to know that the EP president is so interested in climate change. I feel very privileged to be invited here. the EP is a remarkable institution that provides optimism.

Q. Has the Nobel Peace Prize had an impact on you and the IPCC's work?

Dr. Pachauri: I think it has had two sets of impact. First of all: on the scientific community. It is an acknowledgement, a great encouragement and inspiration for all the scientific members of the IPCC. The second impact has been in elevating climate change in the consciousness of people all over the world. The Nobel Peace Prize certainly attaches a great deal of importance to the issue. As for me, I'm going absolutely crazy travelling (laughs). I can only accept 5 to 10 percent of the invitations I receive, but even that is enough to keep me flying continuously. This doesn't make me feel very good but the message has to be spread.