

FEATURE-Targeting air pollution, poor nations aid climate
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By Alister Doyle, Environment Correspondent

BONN, Germany, June 7 (Reuters) - China's car efficiency standards are tougher than those of many industrial states -- a somewhat surprising fact that reveals how efforts by developing nations to limit pollution may also help brake global warming.

Many poorer nations argue that, for them, development must take precedence over saving the planet. But they also want to tackle pollution that is choking their densely populated cities, and are keen to curb energy waste as oil prices soar.

The measures developing countries are taking to cut down fossil fuel use may limit a surge in emissions of heat-trapping gases from power plants, factories and cars.

"Automobile efficiency standards are more stringent in China than in many industrialised countries," said Richard Kinley, officer-in-charge of the United Nations Climate Secretariat in Bonn.

"That is one example of action by developing countries, driven by national development reasons, which also has climate benefits," he told Reuters.

Most scientists say greenhouse gases could cause huge climate changes like floods, heatwaves, droughts and a rise in sea levels that could swamp low-lying Pacific islands by 2100.

The main greenhouse gas is non-toxic carbon dioxide, produced naturally by plants and animals.

How to enlist nations such as China or India in the fight against climate change is a big question hampering U.N. efforts to extend the Kyoto Protocol, which binds almost 40 industrial nations to cut emissions of heat-trapping gases until 2012.

Poor countries say they cannot accept Kyoto-style caps on emissions of greenhouse gases, mainly from burning fossil fuels, in any extension of the pact from 2013. They say they need to burn more energy to drive economic growth.

The United States, the world's top emitter of greenhouse gases, also rejects Kyoto.

"Removal of poverty is the greater immediate imperative" said Prodipto Ghosh, secretary of India's Environment Ministry.

AIR QUALITY

But the need to save money and improve standards of living in choked cities has forced developing nations to take action.

China, the world's most populous nation with 1.3 billion people and a fast-growing economy, faces pressure to curb air pollution as it builds more power plants, adding 500 megawatts of capacity per week, mostly using high-polluting coal.

"Improved air quality is the main reason for investments in technologies to cut energy waste" in China, India and Brazil, said Mark Radka, head of the Paris-based energy branch of the U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP).

"Reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a bonus but not a strong motivation," he said.

Last month, the World Bank said pollution was growing rapidly in India and China because of inefficient investment in energy.

Brazil generates almost all its electricity from hydropower and is building 40 new hydropower stations. Banks in India are seeking ways to lend to businesses to encourage them to cut energy waste.

A recent U.N. study showed that countries from Nicaragua to Mongolia had greater than expected potential for windmills. China says its use of renewable energy in 2000 amounted to the equivalent of burning 33 million tonnes of coal.

As part of Kyoto, rich nations can invest in energy projects in developing countries -- such as a scheme to generate power from rotting trash in Brazil or a wind power project in Morocco -- and claim credits to help meet the Kyoto goals back home.

So far, about 200 projects have been approved with another 760 in the pipeline under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). Some estimates say the scheme could channel \$100 billion in investments to developing nations.

WIN-WIN

"Win-win market mechanisms like CDM should be further explored," China wrote in a report to the U.N. climate talks in Bonn last month.

Kyoto obliges industrial states to cut emissions by at least 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2008-12. Countries began preliminary talks on how to extend the deal beyond 2012 in Bonn.

Developing nations say rich states have to take the lead in making cuts because of their unfettered use of fossil fuels since the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century.

But nations bound by Kyoto -- mainly the European Union, Japan and Canada -- account for only about a third of world emissions of greenhouse gases and say other countries must join in if the U.N.-led scheme is to make a difference.

President George W. Bush pulled the United States out of Kyoto in 2001, arguing that it wrongly excluded poor nations and that emissions caps would harm the U.S. economy.

The United States is the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, at 24.4 percent of the world's total and an average 20.1 tonnes for each citizen. Washington prefers big investments in new technology to Kyoto's caps.

China is second with 12.1 percent of the world total. Per capita emissions are just 2.7 tonnes, but growing fast. India's 1.1 billion population accounts for 4.7 percent of the world total and 1.2 tonnes per capita.

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