

World urged to act on definitive report

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By Fiona Harvey in Paris

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Only urgent international action to cut emissions can prevent climate-related catastrophe, scientists warned on Friday.

Achim Steiner, director-general of the United Nations Environment Programme, said: "The word unequivocal [applied to the evidence that human activity was causing climate change] is the key message in this report. We're looking for an unequivocal commitment [to emissions reduction] from policymakers, business leaders and civic society leaders." For businesses or governments to continue to resist taking action on emissions was "irresponsible".

Yvo de Boer, secretary-general of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, added: "The findings, which governments have agreed upon, leave no doubt as to the dangers mankind is facing and must be acted upon without delay. Any notion that we do not know enough to move decisively against climate change has been clearly dispelled."

He called for work to begin on forging a successor to the Kyoto protocol on climate change, which requires developed countries to reduce their emissions by 5 per cent by 2012. Such an agreement would also involve developing countries, which at present are not obliged to cut their emissions under the treaty. Poor countries would be likely to be given incentives to reduce their emissions rather than face sanctions for failing to cut them, as rich countries would under such a system.

Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said the group's report showed that human activity caused global warming with 90 per cent certainty, which was as much certainty as was ever possible in science. Businesses should find this easy to understand: "You can never be 100 per cent sure. But Lord John Browne of BP has said that we in business are used to taking decisions with uncertainty."

However, finding agreement on a successor to Kyoto will be difficult. Philip Jones, of the University of East Anglia and a lead author of the IPCC report, said that the Chinese government had attempted to insist during the negotiations on the wording of the report that "some statements should be watered down". The US, by contrast, had been "fairly neutral" but China, which sent the biggest delegation of any country to the panel with 17 scientists, had been "obstructive".

The Indian government, which has also been hostile to suggestions it should reduce emissions, had sent only one scientist to the meeting, he said.

As well as taking action to reduce emissions, says the report, governments and businesses will have to adapt to the consequences, as some further warming will take place even if emissions are reduced sharply and immediately. This is because there is a "time lag" in the climate system, as carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere for up to a century after it is emitted, continuing to have a warming effect.

Martin Rees, president of the Royal Society, the UK's national science academy, warned: "The IPCC strongly emphasises that substantial climate change is inevitable and we will have to adapt to this. It also highlights the enormous cost of not doing anything. This should compel all of us – world leaders, businesses and individuals – towards action rather than the paralysis of fear."

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