

Issue Date: January 2008, Posted On: 1/20/2008

## Bottling the billow

*India in global argument over who should assume burden for gas emissions*

BY CHRIS NELSON

In the evolving debate over global warming, a battle has emerged among the planet's industrialized and emerging economies over who should take the lead in cutting carbon-containing greenhouse gases.

In one corner are India and China, the world's two largest countries by population and with two of the fastest-growing economies, which together are urging rich countries to shoulder the burden in the climate fight. And in the other corner is the United States, the world's third-largest country by population but its biggest consumer of energy and the largest producer of greenhouse gases, which along with other industrialized nations, wants emerging economies like India to curb their carbon emissions.

How this battle ends up will likely help shape the Earth's climate years from now, say environmental groups and political leaders worldwide. Former U.S. vice president Al Gore – who received a Nobel Peace Prize last December for sounding the alarm over global warming and for spreading awareness on how to counter it – warned in his acceptance speech that humanity risks sliding down a path of “mutually assured destruction” if it fails to act.

“It is time to make peace with the planet,” Gore said. “We must quickly mobilize our civilization with the urgency and resolve that has previously been seen only when nations mobilize for war. We, the human species, are confronting a planetary emergency – a threat to the survival of our civilization that is gathering ominous and destructive potential even as we gather here.”

Gore, who shared the prestigious award with the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – which is chaired by Rajendra Pachauri of India – urged China and the United States to “make the boldest moves, or stand accountable before history for their failure to act.”

India, for one, has pledged to keep its carbon emissions lower than those of the richest nations. That might seem like an easy promise to make for now: Americans emit on average 20 times more carbon than the average Indian, though it is worth noting that more than 600 million Indians still live in huts without so much as a light bulb, according to Indian government data. But India, with approximately 1.1 billion people, steadfastly refuses to accept binding targets in any United Nations-sponsored deal to combat climate change on the grounds that such a mandate would harm its economy. At the U.N.'s Climate Change Conference in Bali, Indonesia last December, India's deputy environmental minister, N.N. Meeta, said “it is up to the developed world to assist developing countries, including India. We are not ripe enough to make any binding commitments. We are still a developing country.”

Delegates from 187 nations converged on Bali to negotiate a plan that will steer them further on a climate accord for the next two years. The United States successfully persuaded delegates to weaken mandatory cuts in emissions of greenhouse gases blamed for climate change, while India, China and about 130 other developing countries resisted calls that would have made them limit pollution as their economies expand.

The compromise is the first step toward replacing the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which required industrialized nations to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases blamed for global warming. The Kyoto treaty, which George W. Bush declined to give his signature to, runs out in 2012.

Developing countries, a vaguely defined group that includes countries as varying as India and Armenia, have long insisted that rich countries, which spent more than a century adding carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases to the



**Though the United States is the largest producer of greenhouse gases, the country, and other industrialized nations, has put pressure on emerging economies such as India and China to cut back on their carbon gas emissions. India has taken a stance that richer countries should take an equal part in the climate fight. Photo courtesy of clipart.com**

atmosphere, should take the first step. This stance falls in line with the Kyoto pact, which exempts emerging nations such, as India and China from emission targets. Yet it is those two very countries that are expected to become the dominant sources of climate-warming gases in the next few decades.

From one angle, India is the world's fourth-largest producer of greenhouse gases, which are widely believed to be responsible for climate change. Yet India prefers to think of itself as the home of one-sixth of the planet's population, and only responsible for about 5 percent of global emissions. The country's cities are growing increasingly polluted due to the frenetic pace of industrialization, but its per-capita emissions of carbon have been fairly low. In 2001, India released an estimated 0.25 metric tons of carbon, or one-quarter of the world average and 22 times less than the amount released by the United States.

Though the rich countries and their developing counterparts have yet to reach an agreement on which of them should take the lead on climate change, most of them appear to be in lockstep that failure to act will result in disastrous consequences for all nations – regardless of their economic wealth.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – a Paris-based organization of 30 nations that promotes representative democracy and a free- market economy – issued a report last March warning that “the impact of climate change and urban development could more than triple the number of people around the world exposed to coastal flooding by 2070.”

The study, which was co-authored by experts from academia and the private sector, ranked port cities with high exposure and vulnerability to climate extremes.

It predicted that around 150 million people worldwide could be exposed to a 1-in-100-year coastal flood event by 2070, up from 40 million people today. The estimated financial impact of such a catastrophe would also rise to \$38 trillion in 2070 from just \$3 trillion today.

The report noted that half of the total population exposed to coastal flooding caused by storm surges and damage from high winds lives in just 10 cities today. Currently, Mumbai has the highest number of people exposed to coastal flooding, but by 2070, another Indian city would take its place: Kolkata would become the most vulnerable coastal city worldwide, with the exposed population expected to increase sevenfold, to more than 14 million people.

“Climate change is already happening, and concerted action is needed now to prevent its worst impacts,” Angel Gurría, secretary general of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, said in the report. “To tackle it, a range of economic policy options is available and political commitment is needed to implement them.”