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Expediting clean energy technology

GLOBAL COOPERATION: Emergency solutions required to pool and coordinate all efforts to make green energy affordable to all



IN New Delhi last week at the invitation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) for a workshop on low-carbon transport in India, it became very apparent very quickly why global climate change challenges are not going away anytime soon.

The way into the city from the Indira Gandhi International Airport is a sweeping 12-lane expressway, with a Metro rail line overhead. Still, traffic is chock-a-block day and even night. India is far from China's levels of industrialisation and modernisation yet, but if China has since sped past the United States as the world's greatest emitter of carbon, can India, with its billion-plus population soon to exceed China's, be far behind? UNEP's low-carbon transport plans hope to slice 13 billion tonnes off India's carbon emissions in coming decades, laudable but not nearly sufficient.

Indians talk of popular economic aspirations. Most Indians still enjoy erratic supplies of electricity, if at that. Meeting the pent-up demand will entail scaling up on the building of power stations at the rapid rate we have already witnessed in China in the past few decades.

Chances are most of these new power plants will be coal-fired since, despite the promise – hyped or real – of cleaner and renewable sources of energy, coal remains the

cheapest reliable means to generate electricity for a billion-strong market.

With the West historically and China recently having already done most of the damage to the environment, India has become the centre of global attention at the current Paris climate conference as to whether it will add an outsized share to climate changing damage or trek an unprecedentedly cleaner development path.

The trouble with any global climate agreement paradigm thus far – even when the disastrous ravages of climate change are no longer much denied or in dispute – is the emphasis on collective burden-sharing in cutting carbon emissions, the very antithesis of the natural human tendency to thrive on incentives.

Without globally binding targets (leaving aside if any binding ones can even be enforced on the biggest nations), it is doubtful if peer pressure alone will ever do the world environment much good. India, unsurprisingly, is a powerful voice in Paris arguing for “climate justice” for the development laggards of the world who will miss out the party if their development aspirations are now thwarted by the corollary of carbon emission controls universally mandated.

As clear-eyed experts have observed, no matter how one cuts it, poor countries are going to be massively crushed by the cost burdens of climate change mitigation measures that even the rich world finds onerous.

The obvious answer is climate change mitigation financing on a massive scale. How massive? The UN has banded about an annual sum of US\$100 billion (RM423 billion) but that is relatively pittance

when the global economy today is fast approaching the US\$100 trillion mark. But, experience shows that even sums officially pledged often do not all materialise. For their own sake, individual countries will do their bit for climate change mitigation if the major carbon-emission culprit nations do their part by way of example, but will these actions collectively even put a dent to the mounting environmental damage?

Climate change believers in India readily acknowledge that its carbon emissions will grow exponentially in coming decades and that remedial efforts are aimed only to slow its emissions rate. It is clear for that rate to be checked to any appreciable degree, India will need assistance on a scale commensurating with its size and the size of the potential damage it can inflict on the global environment.

India will likely garner the support of other poorer countries, in particular, the 20 so-called most vulnerable nations to climate change and composed mostly of small island-nations, but including the Philippines and Vietnam.

The real test of global cooperation in tackling climate-related issues may centre on bringing clean-energy technology quickly up to scratch so that it becomes cost-effective to switch away from fossil fuels. Many of the technologically advanced countries are undoubtedly competing to discover and market such technology.

But given that the window for climate change action is narrowing and dire consequences loom, emergency solutions are required to pool and coordinate all efforts on the clean energy technology front. Nations and industry players understandably will seek to protect

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technological edges and secrets for economic advantage, but at what cost if, ultimately, we all suffer cataclysmic consequences in the meantime?

International climate change conferences will generate its own share of hot air unless serious money is put where the mouth is, for the greater common good.

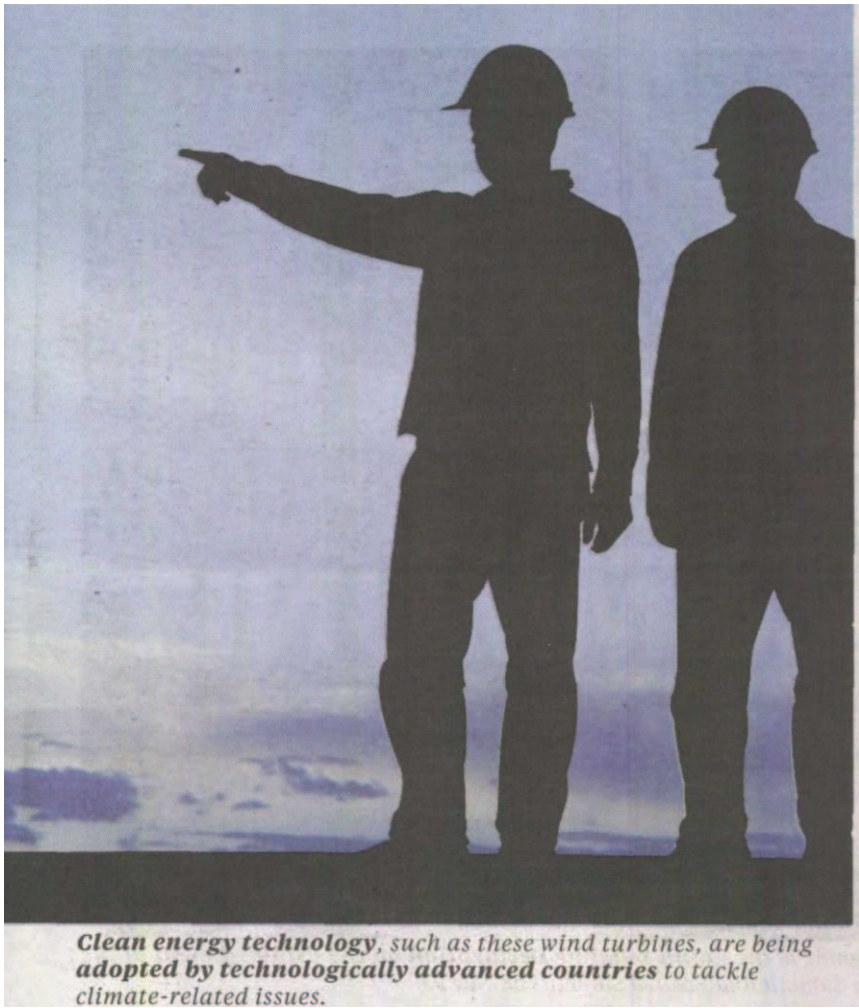
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Clean energy technology, such as these wind turbines, are being adopted by technologically advanced countries to tackle climate-related issues.