

Headline	Getting hotter under the collar		
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Getting hotter under the collar

I THINK we've reached a point where the heatwave jokes are no longer funny ("It's so hot ... the cows are giving evaporated milk"; "... the chickens are laying hard-boiled eggs," "I saw a dog chasing a cat and they were both walking.")

The toilet humour phase has now passed and many are now wondering:

- "When will the heat end?"
- "How much hotter will it get?"
- "When will it rain?"
- "Is this heat going to be a yearly affair?"

"What is the link between the heat and climate change?"

Unfortunately, the scientists don't have a definitive answer to any of those questions. What they *do* know is that 2016's heatwave is equal in intensity to the one in 1997-98, when Malaysians experienced extreme heat - and hazy conditions - for the first time in their lives.

And that although there have been at least 30 El Niños since 1900, there have been only three "super" El Niños in that period: 1982-83, 1997-98 and the one we are suffering through right now.

So far, United Nations scientists have



Onwards and Upwards

BY KHOO HSU CHUANG

restrained their findings to the statistical obvious: that last year was the hottest on record, that 2011-15 was the hottest five-year period ever, and 2014-15 were the two hottest back-to-back years on record.

In fact, each of the last three decades has been successively warmer than any decade prior, and 13 of the 15 hottest years on record have occurred since 2000, with the two exceptions (1997 and 1998) occurring during the strongest El Niño.

But scientists have been stymied by the links or influence - if any - climate change (the primary reason for the warmer temperatures) might have with El Niño, and its counterpart, La Niña.

For the layperson - that is us, since we are smack-bang in the middle of its grip right now - El Niño and its alter ego La Niña are driven by



A corn crop destroyed by the El Niño in Tamauni, Lapogan, Isabela, the Philippines. With the world getting warmer, crop production will be severely impacted and food become more expensive

natural changes in sea-surface temperatures in the tropical Pacific Ocean, affecting weather conditions hundreds and thousands of miles away.

This so-called El Niño Southern Oscillation is characterised by El Niño's warming phase (heat, droughts and bushfires) followed (usually a year later) by La Niña's cooling phase (cooler sea temperatures, high rainfall and floods).

To my untrained eye, I guess the main difference between El Niño and climate change is that one is naturally occurring, while the other is man-made.

But what scientists are happy to say, however, is this: climate change will cause more frequent, variable and intense El Niño/La Niña cycles in the

years to come.

Last year, the hottest-ever on record, already saw calamities on a biblical scale. Among many are:

- ▶ In May, a searing heat wave in India that killed more than 2,300 people (the fifth-deadliest in recorded world history);
- ▶ Pakistan's deadliest heatwave ever in June (death toll: 1,213, eighth-deadliest heatwave on record);
- ▶ Oregon and Washington (enjoying? suffering?) their warmest summer on record, with temperatures in both areas beating their previous record highs;
- ▶ July's heatwave in Europe that

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Climate refugees to be global problem

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brought record temperatures in Germany (40.3°C), amongst many other countries; and

► Record temperatures at the end of July in Iran, which reached 46.1°C with a dew point of 32.2°C, creating a “real feel” temperature of 72.8°C.

The list goes on and on, but the point is clear. In an already warming world, the extreme dryness and heat caused by a Super El Niño as we are currently experiencing, is having calamitous effects on humans and the environment.

Last weekend, in two separate events (one a run in Putrajaya and the other, a triathlon in Penang), there were a number of reports of participants collapsing in the heat. No laughing matter, but those were baby incidents compared to what we will have to get used to.

The world is getting warmer, not cooler and there will be tremendous implications. The predictable ones include melting glaciers and thawing permafrost regions, spelling disaster for low-lying regions, particularly concentrated in Asia, like India, Bangladesh and the island countries of the Maldives, Samoa and Tonga.

As this happens, so-called “climate refugees” will become a new global dilemma, as the displaced millions seek new homes in cooler, more fertile climes.

Crop production will be severely

impacted, meaning limited food supplies and (far) more expensive fruits and vegetables. The wealthy, as they always do, will remain well-fed, but the poorer and less privileged much less so. Many will die.

As warming-related sea level rises occur, coastal flooding and tropical cyclone-related storm surges will worsen, as will other extreme weather patterns, such as the heatwave we are currently experiencing.

As all this occurs, social conflicts will probably worsen. If heatwaves and droughts shorten fuses in “civilised” places like cities, imagine what shortened food and water supplies, storms and destroyed homes will do in areas with few institutions to manage large masses of confused, frightened and hungry villagers.

In the short-term there could be a silver lining: earnings at utilities like Tenaga Nasional and crop producers like KL Kepong might spike, because of tremendous demand for air-conditioning and the resultant drop in yields, driving up prices.

A world disintegrating

But this is a false dawn. The benefits of more cash are far outweighed by the disadvantages of seeing one’s world disintegrating before one’s very eyes.

By now, it is abundantly clear that the so-called “achievements” from last year’s UN Conference on Climate Change (COP21), otherwise known as “the Paris Agreement” are woefully inadequate to deal with the extent of warming already being experienced.

COP21 – not even legally binding yet, as it requires at least 55 countries which together represent at least 55%

of global greenhouse emitters of the 196 attendees to sign the Paris Agreement between April 22, 2016 and April 21, 2017 – and to also adopt it within their own legal systems.

Even if this bunch of politicians, panjandrums and bureaucrats manage to pull their collective fingers out, this pact only envisages a goal of limiting global warming to less than 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels. These are levels which many global regions are approaching or have already surpassed.

So, dear readers, let me add yet another furrow to your brow and say that IMDB, the ringgit and our “leaders” pale on The Worry Scale when compared to this irreversible global juggernaut.

And it’s not as if we can do anything about it. How can foregoing plastic bags one day a week or switching off the lights for one hour a year reverse the environment’s course – really – when the rest of the time we’re busy catching planes, driving cars, using mobile phones and buying new apartments?

So, to once again quote the 96-year-old British scientist James Lovelock, who famously said in 2008 – eight years ago! – that humans are helpless in the face of now-irreversible global warming: “Enjoy life while you can. Because if you’re lucky it’s going to be 20 years before it hits the fan.”

Something to think about it, as we plot business plans 10, 20 years into the future or put down cash deposits for a 35-year mortgage on that idyllic beach-front condo with bracing sea views. [FocusM](#)

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