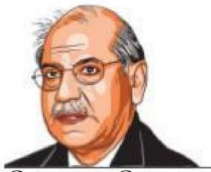
Too little, too late



At COP27, the continuing saga of those responsible for the climate emergency refusing to pay to mitigate it

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THE 27TH CONFERENCE of Parties (COP-27) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change concluded on Sunday, November 20, after the inevitable extension beyond the scheduled closure on Friday. The outcome was underwhelming. The UN Secretary-General had declared at the start of the conference, "We are on a highway to climate hell with our foot still on the accelerator." Post the climate summit, we are still hurtling towards the abyss even if the foot is marginally off the accelerator.

There has been celebration over the agreement, in principle, to set up a fund for compensating vulnerable countries, which have suffered irreversible damage from climate change. This has been a longstanding demand, particularly of vulnerable African and small island developing states. But the funding source and scale of this financial facility and its operating procedures have been left to a transitional committee which will present its report at COP28 next year. Having been through such tortuous negotiations in the past, I see the focus on the loss and damage issue as a clever ploy by developed countries to use up all the oxygen at the summit and deflect attention from the really critical issues, including the repeated failure of the developed countries to own up to their historical responsibility for climate change, their refusal to make deep cuts in their own emissions and deliver on commitments for providing adequate finance and technology to enable developing countries to undertake climate action. On this score, the can has been rolled further down the road.

The Sharm El-Sheikh Implementation Plan is an advance over Glasgow in its more categoric commitment to pursue "efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees centigrade." It acknowledges that such a goal will require "rapid, deep and sustained reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions". Drawing from the latest 6th Assessment Report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), it even quantifies the scale of reduction required by 2030 over the 2019 level — 43 per cent. It fails to mention another finding from the IPCC Report, that global emissions must peak by 2025, barely three years from now. However, the Implementation Plan does not spell out how this ambitious outcome is to be achieved. In an astute move, India urged that the COP27 acknowledge the need for a phasing out of all fossil fuels but that was not accepted. Instead, we have a commitment to "low emission pathways", a "phase down of unabated coal" and to the promotion of renewable energy. There is no advance on the Glasgow commitment.

India depends on imports for 90 per cent of its oil needs and 60 per cent of its natural gas requirements. Even 30 per cent of its coal requirements have to be imported. The sources of supply are in politically-sensitive regions and disruptions can be costly. India has abundant solar energy and recent advances have made green hydrogen a promising source of clean energy. It makes sense for India to engage wholeheartedly in carrying out this energy transition, which will also be a significant contribution to dealing with global climate change.

The Implementation Plan closely follows the formulation on the subject included in the G-20 Declaration at Bali, which preceded the climate summit.

The document relating to finance adopted at Sharm El-Sheikh acknowledges that the commitment on the part of developed countries to provide $100 billion annually to support climate action by developing countries from 2015 onwards through 2025 has not been delivered on. There is no quantification yet of the additional financial commitment which must be made in the post-2025 period. While there is a rhetorical acknowledgement of the need for "climate justice", this is not matched by practical action. The energy transition away from fossil fuels requires the investment of massive resources. The question has remained the same over the years — who pays?

The Implementation Plan in its section on finance highlights that "about US$ 4 trillion per year needs to be invested in renewable energy up until 2030 to be able to reach net zero emissions by 2050. And that, furthermore, a global transformation to a low carbon economy is expected to require an investment of at least US$ 4-6 trillion per year". These are figures for both developed and developing countries and are of an unprecedented scale. For developing countries, to enable them to deliver on their nationally determined contributions, the Implementation Plan estimates a figure of $5.8-5.9 trillion in the pre-2030 period. When even a modest figure of $100 billion has not been delivered on since 2015 what hope is there that in an international environment beset by multiple crises, these financial flows will actually materialise?

The Ukraine war and the serious disruptions in energy supply chains have led to a surge in the prices of oil, gas and even coal. There has been backsliding on commitments to shift away from fossil fuels, in particular coal, even among champions of climate change action such as the European Union. Coal-based thermal power is being revived in several countries to deal with acute shortages of oil and gas, though this may be temporary. This points to the complexity of managing the energy transition towards renewables and clean energy. There will be a considerable period when the two energy systems will co-exist and will interact with each other. The transition enhances vulnerabilities and requires efficient and well-run fossil fuel as well as renewable and clean energy systems. The premature retirement of fossil-based energy systems should be avoided even as one accelerates the use of renewable and clean energy. The process must be measured and carefully synchronised. This means that even if resources are available, an accelerated energy transition may not be feasible. The world may have engaged in this transition too little, too late. This demands much greater attention to adaptation than has been the case so far.

Where does that leave India? The imperative of energy security behoves India to undertake a strategic shift from its reliance on fossil fuels to an energy system based on renewable sources of energy and cleaner sources of energy with the most promising being green hydrogen. India depends on imports for 90 per cent of its oil needs and 60 per cent of its natural gas requirements. Even 30 per cent of its coal requirements have to be imported. The sources of supply are in politically-sensitive regions and disruptions can be costly. India has abundant solar energy and recent advances have made green hydrogen a promising source of clean energy. It makes sense for India to engage wholeheartedly in carrying out this energy transition, which will also be a significant contribution to dealing with global climate change.

There are also major opportunities for increasing energy security through enhancing energy efficiency. This too will contribute to addressing global climate change. India did well to preserve its equities at COP27 and in supporting the constituency of developing countries. It is well placed to use its forthcoming chairmanship of the G20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to take the lead in tackling climate change through its own example.

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