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Western nations must bear financial cost to fight climate change: India

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Union Environment Minister Bhopender Yadav on Sunday said India's per capita carbon emission is among the lowest in the world and therefore the western industrialized nations should shoulder the bulk of the financial burden for combating climate change.

Addressing the "Conference on Environmental Diversity and Environmental Jurisprudence: National and International Perspective" at Chandigarh University, the minister also stressed the need to strike a balance between development and environment.

He said India's environmental law and policy is not only about protection and conservation it is also about equity and justice.

"There can be no environmental justice and equity if the people most affected by environmental protection measures are those who are not responsible for the problem.

"This operates both globally and locally: India's per capita carbon emission is among the lowest in the world (two tonnes) and therefore, the western industrialized nations should shoulder the bulk of the financial burden for combating climate change," a statement quoted the minister as saying.

Yadav also spoke about the "waves of environmental litigation over the years which have become detrimental to the development".

"The society will have to prosper, but not at the cost of the environment and similarly the environment will have to be protected but not at the cost of development. The need of the hour is striking a balance between the two," he said.

Yadav said the latest IPCC Working Group III report justifies India's emphasis on equity at all scales in climate action and sustainable development. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the United Nations body for the assessment of climate change.

"Equity remains a central element in the UN climate regime, notwithstanding shifts in differentiation between states over time and challenges in assessing fair shares," the minister quoted from the report.

He said India has the world's largest number of forest-dependent communities and their livelihood, culture and existence depend on access to forest.

"In our zeal to protect forests, we cannot overlook the existence of such a large number of forest-dwelling communities. It is for this reason that western ideas of conservation, which excludes local people, can have serious ramifications on the rights of forest-dependent communities," Yadav added.

"Similarly, our coastal areas provide livelihoods to the largest fisherfolk communities in the world whose very existence is dependent on the integrity of coastal areas. Therefore, even though it is important to focus on building climate resilience infrastructure in coastal areas, it is equally important to ensure that no adverse impact is caused to those whose livelihood depends on coasts," he said.

Yadav stressed that environmental law, despite its development in recent times, is still in its infancy.

"The concept of liability needs to be developed both at the national and international levels. Environmental jurisprudence is still focused on punishing the polluter or the poacher at the local level whereas the reality of climate change, pollution of oceans and air requires us to devise mechanisms which can look beyond the national boundaries. This is crucial given the fact that there is limited mechanism to hold polluters accountable if the origin is not within the country," he said.

The minister also lauded the judiciary for playing a significant role in the redressal of environmental problems.

"Industrialisation and preservation of the environment are two conflicting interests and their harmonisation is a major challenge before the judicial system and the governance system of the country," he said.

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