

'For Covid recovery, keep climate goals in mind'

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India must be part of a global coalition for net zero emissions by mid-century, said UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres in an exclusive interview to TOI's Sunil Warrier and Manka Behl, just before his 'State of the Planet' virtual speech on the Paris Climate Agreement's fifth anniversary. Excerpts:

India is opening more coal mines despite the increase in air pollution. What is your message to India?

By adopting the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) in line with 2-degree increase in temperature at the end of the century, leading the solar alliance and innovation in renewables, India has made remarkable efforts to tackle climate change. My appeal to India now is to join what we are building — a global coalition for net zero emissions by mid-century. Europe, Japan and Korea have announced net zero by 2050, China before 2060 and soon the new American administration will join the coalition. I am hopeful India will soon join the net zero coalition too. I would ask India to increase efforts to promote renewables. Nobody will benefit more in the drastic reduction of pollution — coal a part of it — than the Indian population.

Do you think India's NDC is sufficient and compatible to move to the 2-degree C or is there scope to review it given announcements by other countries recently?

India has made an important contribution, but it must also improve its NDC. I believe India's contribution will become increasingly important. That said, I pay tribute to efforts India has already made, and wish it success in becoming a true leader

in climate action as it corresponds to the will of the Indian government and people. Full credit to the Indian political will for what it has achieved so far.

Observers doubt the commitment of countries that announced net zero target. What can reassure the global community that the pledge will be kept?

There are two key credibility tests. First, the NDCs that will be presented before COP26 in Glasgow next year and, second, the investments and measures announced. For instance, reducing subsidies to fossil fuels, stopping construction of nuclear plants, shifting taxation from income to pollution, supporting renewables effectively. Developed countries will have to ensure the promise of \$100 billion per year to developing countries — for mitigation and adaptation — is met. Asset managers are decarbonizing their portfolios. We see banks aligning more with climate action in their lending. But this is still minor. Several Indian companies are doing it. For instance, the Mahindra group has been a pioneer in this dimension.

The US spent the last four years galloping in the wrong direction, including its exit from the Paris Agreement. What do you expect from the incoming Biden administration?

The level of emissions of the US even during the last four years is still the highest but has been reduced. The new administration has announced it will aim at net zero. You will see the NDC will come as soon as the US rejoins the Paris Agreement and prepares for COP26. I hope they will be clear in making sure the US assumes leadership in climate action and does not lag behind others. Without the US, it will be impossible to achieve our goals to limit the growth of temperature at the end of the century by 1.5 degrees Celsius.

What's the progress on the Paris Agreement?

The Paris Agreement is a good road map. But it is necessary that it is implemented. It was known five years ago that NDCs presented were not sufficient and needed to be enhanced.

Only India's NDC is in line for the 2-degree warming scenario. Many other countries are still 2.5-3 or 5 degrees at the end of the century. That will be devastating for the global economy.

There has been no political will in these last five years in all countries. But now we see a new momentum. The private sector is showing governments they need to act, the youth are mobilising everywhere, civil society is pushing for action. We are at war with nature. Look at what is happening with the storms and hurricanes destroying economies in many countries. Look at the terrible impact of droughts. India is suffering a lot.

From now on, I am sure there will be a new momentum. At the UN, we will do everything possible to make sure that 2021 is the year of truth, when we move decisively into 1.5 degrees at the end of the century as an objective for everybody. If we do not do so, we are moving towards suicide in relation to future generations. We must make peace between humankind and nature. If we do not act immediately, things will be irreversible.

Would you say 2020 has been the year where Asian nations announced much more ambitious climate targets than the developed countries?

It is essential all developed countries commit to a reduction of 45% of their emissions until 2030, to carbon neutrality in 2050 and implement the \$100 billion fund. The developed countries have a particular responsibility in fulfilling the role. Developed countries must lead the world. They have the obligation to do so because they have been for decades the main contributors to global warming.

Has the pandemic pushed back gains made in decarbonization around the world? There are reports that some countries are using Covid-19 as a reason to dig more coal.

It is true we are seeing 50% more of the recovery money used for fossil-fuel-related activities than for renewables. This is regrettable. We are spending trillions of dollars that are being borrowed. It means we are going to give a debt to the new generations. It is essential that the money we are spending to recover is in line with the green economy, with priority to renewables in energy and in relation to all other aspects of green recovery in industry, agriculture and all human activities.

This interview was coordinated by Covering Climate Now, a global consortium of news outlets to strengthen coverage of the

climate story