**Prioritising environmental challenges**

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On June 5, Pakistan, for the first time had the honour of hosting World Environment Day 2021, in partnership with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), under the banner of “Ecosystem Restoration”. The virtual conference also featured special messages from Chinese President XI Jinping, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres as well as the UNEP executive director of UNEP. All of whom acknowledged and praised the initiatives taken by Pakistan to mitigate the impact of climate change, including the Ten Billion Trees Tsunami project. They also stressed the need for a cohesive international action plan to restore the ecosystem while lowering the trajectory of global warming.

Prime Minister Imran Khan addressed the moot and apprised the world community of his government’s future plans on the environmental front, such as Recharge Pakistan — designed to divert flood water to wetlands to recharge the water table — as well as mangrove forestation which absorbs carbon besides green-house gases. Explaining the climate change threat faced by Pakistan, he rightly remarked that the world needed to pay attention to reducing carbon emissions which cause glacier melting and pose threats to countries like Pakistan, as well as Central Asia where rivers are fed by glaciers. The PM also called on the world community to tackle the urgent challenge of restoring the ecosystem over the next decade while pressing rich nations to assist the countries of the Global South, including Pakistan, which bear the greatest brunt of this phenomenon.

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Climate change, including global warming, undoubtedly represents the greatest challenge of the 21st century. It is not the first time that voices for collective action have resonated to check this phenomenon in its tracks. Earlier UN initiatives produced two relevant international accords: the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement. In both cases, industrial nations committed to reducing their carbon emissions. They also pledged assistance to developing nations that did not have the technical know-how or the resources to effectively deal with climate change. Unfortunately, those guarantees were never upheld; even though global warming poses ever-growing threats to people’s lives, health, jobs, safety and food security. This is not to mention the devastation wrought by freak weather and floods.

The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) provisional report on the State of the Global Climate in 2020 finds that the year 2020 was one of the three warmest years on record. Also, the UN-backed Production Gap Report 2020 notes that countries must decrease fossil fuels by 6 percent per year — between 2020 and 2030 — to avoid a “catastrophic” global temperature rise. Environmental scientists believe that if carbon emissions are not reduced or controlled, global temperatures might register a rise between 1.1 to 6.5 Celsius by the end of the 21st century; with all the accompanying cataclysmic consequences this will unleash on all of humanity.

It is pertinent to note that Pakistan has committed to producing 60 per cent of all energy through renewable resources by 2030. Already, the country has scrapped two coal power projects which were supposed to generate 2600 MW of electricity and replaced them with hydro-power units. Pakistan — as vice president of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — has also been playing a pro-active role in shaping the global discourse on fighting global warming.

The remedies evolved by Pakistan are surely worth emulating by other developing countries and even developed nations. It goes without saying that the primary onus of mitigating the impact of climate change rests with the industrial nations, such as: the US, China, Russia, Britain, Germany, Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea.

The Biden administration has demonstrated a renewed commitment to fighting climate. For despite never ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and pulling out of the Paris Agreement — Washington rejoined the latter back in January. The US president also organised the Leaders Summit on Climate during the last week of April. Some forty countries were invited to participate; although Pakistan was only included at the last minute. The Summit underscored the urgency and the economic benefits of stronger climate action. Its deliberations will represent a key milestone on the road to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), scheduled for November in Glasgow. Hopefully, the reflections made at the World Environment Day moot will also contribute positively to the COP 26 agenda.

I think there is now growing realisation among the industrial nations — as well as the developing countries — that the time has come to move beyond rhetoric and translate commitment into concrete action. We have no other choice.