

UN report warns last eight years hottest on record

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United Nations, November 8 (RHC)-- The past eight years are on track to be the hottest ever recorded, a United Nations report has found, as UN chief Antonio Guterres warned that the planet was sending “a distress signal.”

The UN’s weather and climate body released its annual state of the global climate report on Sunday with another warning that the target to limit temperature increases to 1.5C (2.7F) was “barely within reach.”

The acceleration of heat waves, glacier melts and torrential rains has led to a rise in natural disasters, the World Meteorological Organization said as the UN’s COP27 climate summit opened in the Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt.

“As COP27 gets under way, our planet is sending a distress signal,” said Guterres, who described the report as “a chronicle of climate chaos.”

Representatives from nearly 200 states gathered in Egypt will discuss how to keep the rise in temperatures to 1.5C, as recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a goal some scientists say is now unattainable.

Earth has warmed more than 1.1C since the late 19th century with roughly half of that increase occurring in the past 30 years, the report showed. This year is on track to be the fifth or sixth warmest ever recorded despite the impact since 2020 of La Nina, a periodic and naturally occurring phenomenon in the Pacific that cools the atmosphere.

“All the climatic indications are negative,” World Meteorological Organization head Petteri Taalas told Al Jazeera from Sharm el-Sheikh. “We have broken records in main greenhouse gas concentrations, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide [levels].”

“I think the combination of the facts that we are bringing to the table and the fact that we have started seeing impacts of climate change worldwide ... are wake-up calls, and that’s why we have this climate conference,” he said.

Surface water in the ocean hit record high temperatures in 2021 after warming especially fast during the past 20 years. Surface water is responsible for soaking up more than 90 percent of accumulated heat from human carbon emissions.

Marine heat waves were also on the rise, adversely affecting coral reefs and the half-billion people who depend on them for food and their livelihoods. The report warned that more than 50 percent of the ocean surface experienced at least one marine heatwave in 2022.

Sea level rise has also doubled in the past 30 years as ice sheets and glaciers melted at a fast pace. The phenomenon threatens tens of millions of people living in low-lying coastal areas. “The messages in this report could barely be bleaker,” said Mike Meredith, science leader at the British Antarctic Survey.

In March and April, a heatwave in South Asia was followed by floods in Pakistan, which left a third of the country underwater. At least 1,700 people died, and eight million were displaced. In East Africa, rainfall has been below average in four consecutive wet seasons, the longest in 40 years, with 2022 set to deepen the drought.

China saw the longest and most intense heatwave on record and the second-driest summer. Similarly in Europe, repeated bouts of high temperatures caused many deaths.

The UN warning was made as delegates at the summit agreed to hold discussions on compensation by rich nations to poorer ones most likely to be affected by climate change.

“This creates for the first time an institutionally stable space on the formal agenda of COP and the Paris Agreement to discuss the pressing issue of funding arrangements needed to deal with existing gaps, responding to loss and damage,” COP27 President Sameh Shoukry told the opening session.

Poorer nations least responsible for climate-warming emissions but most vulnerable to its impacts are suffering the most and are, therefore, asking for what has also been called “climate reparations”. This item, added to the agenda in Egypt on Sunday, is expected to cause tension. At COP26 last year in Glasgow, high-income nations blocked a proposal for a loss and damage financing body and instead supported three years of funding discussions.

The loss and damage discussions now on the agenda at COP27 will not involve liability or binding compensation but they are intended to lead to a conclusive decision “no later than 2024”, Shoukry said. “The inclusion of this agenda reflects a sense of solidarity for the victims of climate disasters,” he said.

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