

STORMS AND RISING SEAS

THE POST-CLIMATE-CHANGE WORLD IS UPON US



People struggle through flooded streets after a canal burst in Dhaka, Bangladesh

In 2020, we entered a post-climate-change world, warns leading scientist Saleemul Huq – and that makes November’s COP26 climate summit a make-or-break event for our planet. **Karen Thomas** reports

Professor Saleemul Huq is sitting in his Bangladesh office on the other end of our Zoom call. It’s Thursday lunchtime, local time and the eminent climate scientist will head off for the weekend after our call.

The director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) is one of the world’s top experts on the meeting points of climate change and sustainable development. He wrote the chapter on adaptation and sustainable development for the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment report.

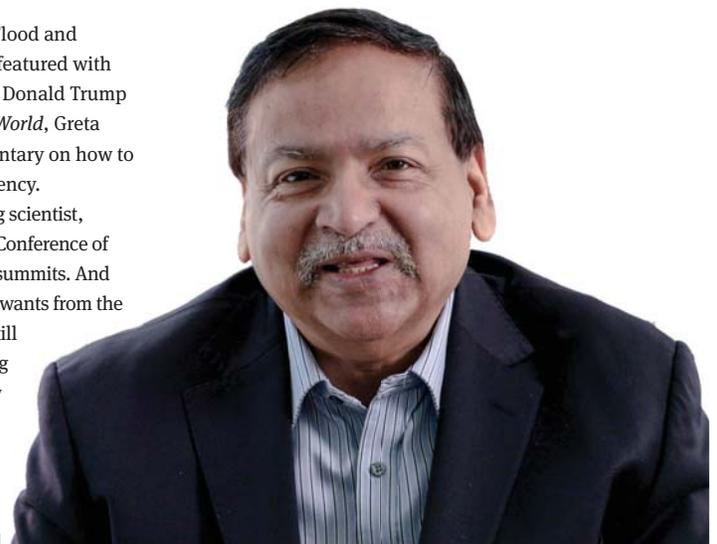
CIWEM members will have heard

Huq address last year’s Flood and Coast. More recently, he featured with David Attenborough and Donald Trump on *A Year to Change the World*, Greta Thunberg’s BBC documentary on how to tackle the climate emergency.

Huq is a straight-talking scientist, veteran of all 25 previous Conference of the Parties (COP) climate summits. And when it comes to what he wants from the delayed COP26 summit, still due – at the time of writing – to reconvene in Glasgow in November, he does not mince his words.

COP26 is now one year

late. In Huq’s view, the delay has allowed a vital transition to pass unmarked; 2020 marked the turning point from a pre- to a post-climate-change world. And that makes destructive floods, cyclones and



Professor Saleemul Huq

wildfires the new normal for our planet. “Scientists can attribute the intensity – if not the incidence – of these events to climate change,” he says. “The fact that 2020 has been the warmest year on record is attributable to human-induced climate change.”

“In retrospect, I think we will remember 2020 not just as the year of Covid, but as the year that marked the transition from a pre- to a post-climate-change world. In future, we may look back and think of 2020 as one of the coolest years.”

“In this climate-change world, we are now looking at warmer years every year.”

AMBITION

It’s a depressing thought. In its landmark report in October 2018, the IPCC warned that we have 12 years to limit catastrophic levels of climate change. Six years have passed since world governments shook hands on the Paris Agreement to limit climate change to within 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. But our trajectory has not changed.

COP26 must hold governments to account – especially those of developed countries – for the promises they made in Paris and agree more ambitious targets to halt catastrophe, Huq says. “We are not doing enough, and that must be the priority for the UK presidency of COP. A temperature increase above 2°C pushes adaptation out of the window. Not even the UK can adapt to global heating above 3°C.”

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“That level of warming brings death and destruction. We need to limit warming to within parameters within which adaptation is still feasible.”

Time’s up when it comes to climate justice, he warns. Rich nations need to do much more to help the island nations and countries of the global south that are most at risk from, least able to cope with climate change.

“That means a lot more investment. In Paris, the rich countries promised US\$100 billion a year to help developing countries to tackle climate change from 2020. Well 2020 has come and gone, and we have tried to track how much money has been offered.”

“The best estimates suggest that US\$80 billion was forthcoming last year. But some 80 per cent went towards developed countries’ mitigation efforts to cut their own emissions. We’re not against this, but 20 per cent for adaptation simply isn’t enough.”

“We, the developing countries, want whatever money the global system has set aside to tackle climate change to be split 50/50 between adaptation and mitigation. We need the balance of resources for adaptation to double or triple.”

A FAIR COP

That also begs the question who receives these funds. “The most vulnerable communities in the most vulnerable countries are getting maybe 10 per cent of that 20 per cent,” Huq says. “They get just 2 per cent of that global funding to tackle climate change.”

“To my mind, this – simply – is morally wrong. The simple fact is that it’s rich people causing this problem. Poor people in poor countries aren’t causing climate change; their emissions are tiny. If rich countries are serious about supporting poor countries they have to do a much better job.”

“COP26 has to recognise that we’ve done a really bad job so far and have to do much better. This social injustice is a problem that rich people have caused. Every religion teaches us to be fair and moral – and that it’s immoral to hurt the poor.”

If we now live in a post-climate-change world, we must adapt urgently to its new normals; extreme storms and droughts, melting icesheets and crumbling coastlines. Bangladesh – with its waterfront settlements, fragile deltas and seasonal cyclones – is one of the world’s most vulnerable countries. Climate change could displace one in seven of its 163 million people.

“We are already seeing people losing their lives and livelihoods and infrastructure,” Huq says. “So much is already beyond adaptation... What’s new now is rising sea levels, thanks to

melting glaciers and icesheets in the Arctic and Antarctic. Salinity incursion is a reality, and it’s because of sea-level rise – a problem we can directly attribute to climate change.”

Warmer seas give Bay of Bengal cyclones more energy, making them more destructive when they hit landfall. And Bangladesh doctors are seeing more pregnant women with pre-eclampsia from higher salt levels in local drinking water.

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“One of the most sensitive issues facing COP26 is climate-change loss and damage,” Huq says. “The most vulnerable countries will press hard on this but face pushback from the developed countries who fear tough questions about liability.”

It was still unclear, at time of writing, whether COP26 would go ahead as a live event, would move online or get delayed again. Some youth campaigners want to postpone it until everyone can safely attend, citing unequal access to Covid vaccines between rich and poor countries.

But if 2020 marked a climate turning-point, Huq says, November’s summit must go ahead. “Any further delay to COP26 will be totally unacceptable to the most vulnerable countries – not only unacceptable, but it will make the COP process and the UNFCCC wholly redundant.”

“The pace of climate change has overtaken our ability to talk about the solutions. We’ve talked about solutions for a long time; we have not delivered them. COP26 is ultra-important. It’s time to take stock of what we have achieved so far and to plan the next five years. Either we do this well or we don’t. It’s a fork in the road.”

“We need COP26 to set us on a new path, so that we do not continue along the wrong path, which is business as usual. COP26 needs to be transformational.” ◉