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IPCC's warning on climate points to a small window of opportunity that still exists

The IPCC has issued arguably its strongest warning yet on impending catastrophe from unmitigated global warming caused by human activity, lending scientific credence to the argument that rising wildfires, heatwaves, extreme rainfall and floods witnessed in recent times are all strongly influenced by a changing climate. In a stark report on the physical science basis of climate change contributed for a broader Assessment Report of the UN, the IPCC's Working Group I has called for deep cuts to carbon dioxide emissions and other greenhouse gases and a move to net zero emissions, as the world would otherwise exceed 1.5°C and 2°C of warming during the 21st century with permanent consequences. Climate change is described by many as a far greater threat to humanity than COVID-19, because of its irreversible impacts. The latest report is bound to strengthen the criticism that leaders in many countries have stonewalled and avoided moving away from coal and other fossil fuels, while even those who promised to act, failed to influence the multilateral system. The new report attributes catastrophic events to sustained global warming, particularly the frequency and intensity of hot extremes, marine heatwaves, heavy precipitation, agricultural and ecological droughts, proportion of intense tropical cyclones, reductions in Arctic Sea ice, snow cover and permafrost. A phenomenon such as heavy rainfall over land, for instance, could be 10.5% wetter in a world warmer by 1.5°C, and occur 1.5 times more often, compared to the 1850-1900 period.

More than five years after the Paris Agreement was concluded, there is no consensus on raising ambition to reduce emissions, making access to low carbon technologies easier, and adequately funding mitigation and adaptation. COVID-19 had the unexpected effect of marginally and temporarily depressing emissions. The IPCC's analysis presents scenarios of large-scale collapse of climate systems that future leaders would find virtually impossible to manage. Heatwaves and heavy rainfall events experienced with increasing frequency and intensity are just two of these, while disruptions to the global water cycle pose a more unpredictable threat. Also, if emissions continue to rise, oceans and land, two important sinks and the latter a key part of India's climate action plan, would be greatly weakened in their ability to absorb atmospheric carbon dioxide. The new report sets the stage for the CoP26 conference in November. The only one course to adopt there is for developed countries with legacy emissions to effect deep cuts, transfer technology without strings to emerging economies and heavily fund mitigation and adaptation. Developing nations should then have no hesitation in committing themselves to steeper emissions cuts.