

Leadership and Climate Change

By Ban Ki-moon

Every day brings new evidence. Climate change has become a personal reality, for each and every one of us on this planet.

Just a few days ago, to cite but the latest example, scientists in the United States reported that the Arctic ice cap is melting faster than ever thought possible. By their calculations, 40 percent of the summer ice covering the Arctic sea will be gone by 2050. Earlier studies had predicted that this wouldn't happen for another century.

It's small wonder, then, that climate change has shot to the top of the world's political agenda. That is why I have invited world leaders to the United Nations for a high-level meeting tomorrow ((ck against actual date: September 24.)) I am deeply concerned that our current response falls far short of what is required.

[Today/tomorrow's] meeting is a political call to action, a time for all countries, big and small, to grasp the moral imperative of tackling climate change with a new urgency, and to begin to understand our mutual self-interest in doing so. Climate change is a defining issue of our time.

The science is clear. Earlier this year, the world's top scientists, under the auspices of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, laid it out with unprecedented clarity. Global warming is real. Its impact, if unchecked, could be devastating if not catastrophic over the coming decades. We know what we have to do. We have affordable measures and technologies to do it. We must begin to attack the problem, right now.

What we do not have is time. Traveling in Chad recently, I saw first-hand the humanitarian toll of climate change. An estimated 20 million people depend on a lake and river system that has shrunk to a tenth of its original size over the past 30 years. In Africa right now, the worst rains in memory are washing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. These are signs of what is to come. The problems our generation faces will be worse for our children, particularly if we do not act.

In calling tomorrow's [September 24] meeting, I have challenged the world's presidents and prime ministers to show leadership. Leadership is about choices, especially hard choices and setting new directions. It is about vision and

political will—the ability to see ahead to what we must do, and to force the pace of change. I know it will not all be painless. But only through early action can even more pain be avoided.

We must, collectively, place the highest value on action. And the burden is highest on industrialized countries. Those responsible for creating the bulk of the problem bear the greatest responsibility to reduce the emissions that cause climate change.

At the same time, developing countries must be given incentives to fully join the effort. Our solutions to global warming cannot demand sacrifices they cannot, fairly, be asked to make. Developing nations have a right to growth and economic development. They have a right to lift themselves out of poverty, with our continuing help. In these efforts, we must engage the private sector, stimulate economic activity, use new financing and market-based approaches, develop and transfer know-how, and create jobs.

Our earth is more fragile than we might think. Whole ecosystems that support millions of lives face significant disruption. In some cases, whole countries and peoples—not only animal species—are at risk of disappearing. And the effects are being felt most acutely by those least able to cope and least responsible for the problem. This is a moral issue. Our responses must be guided by the principles of common responsibility and the common good.

National action must be at the center of our response. So far, those efforts have been inadequate. Fifteen years after the Framework Convention on Climate Change was agreed upon in Rio, and ten years after the Kyoto Protocol (whose first commitment period expires in 2012) carbon emissions in the industrialized nations are still rising.

Yet national policies are not enough. The invisibility of borders when it comes to climate-affecting gases, and the broad range of political and economic interests involved, requires international cooperation. We have an ideal framework. It's called the United Nations—uniquely equipped to serve as a forum for hammering out a meaningful, equitable and sustainable long-term solution to global climate change. This solution will need not only to mitigate the emissions problem, but also help all – especially the most vulnerable – to adapt to climate change's effects, and ensure sustainable development. ((Can cut this sentence for space.))

In this crossroads year—the year in which governments have accepted the compelling findings of the IPCC, the year in which public awareness of climate

change has come to dominate political agendas across the globe—I am calling on world leaders to exercise leadership. To act. Business as usual will not do.

At the UN Climate Change Conference this December in Bali, governments must work with urgency and creativity to put a negotiating framework in place. We need a new and comprehensive multilateral accord on climate change that all nations can embrace.

For all of us, this is a defining moment. We all have a historical responsibility to future generations. Our grandchildren will be our judges.