Modest response to climate change threat

- Little new action proposed
- IPCC process questioned

London

AN early draft of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on responses to global warming which was leaked to the press last week has outraged environmentalists by failing to call for stringent cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. But the outcry may persuade IPCC's working group III to take a tougher line and revise the report at its final meeting in Geneva next week.

On the key issue of carbon dioxide emissions, the draft report does not suggest major changes from current national positions. Western European countries, the report says, may be able to "stabilize or reduce carbon dioxide emissions by early in the next decade". No mention of reductions is made for other regions. Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union may, at best, stabilize emissions over the next two decades, and developing countries may be able to "reduce the annual growth in carbon dioxide emissions from over 3 to around 2 per cent", the draft says.

It is the suggested response from 'North American and Pacific OECD countries' that has attracted most criticism. The report says only that the United States and Japan may be able to slow the growth in carbon dioxide emissions. No timetable is given.

Simon Roberts from Friends of the Earth says "this looks like political intervention with no science at all", a view shared by most environmental pressure groups. Unlike IPCC's other two working groups, which consist mostly of scientists, group III is chaired by a US representative, dominated by civil servants, and has strong Japanese representation.

Group III's suggestions, if carried out, would slow the growth of global carbon dioxide emissions. But the atmospheric concentration of the gas would continue to rise. Climate models produced by IPCC group I, whose report was finalized last week at a meeting in the United Kingdom, predict that emissions of long-lived greenhouse gases (including carbon dioxide) must be cut by more than 60 per cent to stabilize atmospheric concentrations at today's levels.

The group I report predicts the climate change that may result under several different scenarios. If carbon dioxide emissions increase unchecked and atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration doubles by 2025–50, global mean temperature is predicted to increase at about

0.3° C per decade. The most rigid anti-greenhouse strategy examined, reducing carbon dioxide emissions substantially over the next century, gives a predicted rate of increase of about 0.1° C per decade. The implication is that some degree of economic adaptation to climate change, regardless of the action taken to reduce the greenhouse effect, is now probably inevitable.

An early draft of group II's report, looking at the impacts of climate change, was also leaked to the press last week. The draft, to be finalized in Moscow this week, assumes no reduction in carbon dioxide emissions and makes several alarming predictions. Millions of people may be uprooted by flooding, erosion and changes in agriculture, into areas that are "likely to have insufficient health and other support services". Group II's draft says that global agricultural production could be sustained if there are no reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, but many natural ecosystems could not cope with the expected rate of climate change.

Ralph Cicerone, from the University of California, Irvine, one of the scientists who worked on group I's report, believes expectations from "a hasty study like CARBON DIOXIDE EMISSIONS

IPCC" may have been too high. He contrasts the IPCC process, which has been running for little over a year, with the long haul towards the three-volume report on chlorofluorocarbons and the ozone layer, which formed the scientific background to the Montreal protocol. The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration began work in 1977, but the final report, compiled with the World Meteorological Organization, was not published until 1986. Cicerone thinks that IPCC must be regarded as a first step towards international agreement, not the final answer. But he hopes that politicians will not use the IPCC reports as "an excuse to do nothing".

A lack of communication between IPCC's working groups may have caused problems. One scientist involved with working group I suggests that the whole process would have been better conducted in serial, rather than parallel with group I feeding its completed report into group II, and so on.

Alan Miller, from the Center for Climate Change at the University of Maryland, thinks that the attitude of the British prime minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher will now be a key factor (see below). West Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries are pushing for cuts in emissions, but Britain has been seen to support the United States. IPCC will present a single report to the World Climate Conference in the Autumn, so there will further scope for amendment of group III's position on greenhouse emission controls.

Peter Aldhous

British pledge on reductions

Bracknell, Berkshire

PRIME minister Mrs Margaret Thatcher last Friday (25 May) pledged Britain to return its carbon dioxide emissions back to 1990 levels by 2005, provided the target was part of "a wide international effort". This involved undercutting present UK emission projections by "up to 30 per cent", she said.

Mrs Thatcher was in Bracknell to open the Meteorological Office's new Hadley Centre for climate prediction and research. Dressed in a dark suit matching her sombre message, she spoke of the flooding and drought that could result if global warming is not checked. "People will be crying out, not for oil wells, but for water", she warned.

But the speech gave little detail of how British emissions would be stabilized. An overhaul of transport and energy policy is thought essential by many, but Mrs Thatcher chose instead to highlight the role of the private sector. Worldwide application of a new method of ammonia production, developed in Britain, would have the

same effect on carbon dioxide emissions as removing five million cars from the road, she said. Details of government policy on global warming will be given in a white paper (policy document) on the environment, in the autumn.

Dan Lasher, from the US Natural Resources Defense Council, countered immediately after the speech that the prime minister's proposal on UK emissions "doesn't respond to the threat she underscored". If developed countries merely freeze emissions, he said, global emissions will still increase with growing energy demand in developing countries.

The proposed British response fits within the loose guidelines on emissions laid down in the leaked draft report from working group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (see above). But other Western European countries plan reductions — West Germany has already committed itself to a 25 per cent reduction in emissions from 1987 levels by 2005.

Peter Aldhous