

# Interview: Rajendra Pachauri

Last month's UN Climate Change Conference in Bali marked the end of a year that saw the world turn its attention to global warming, largely owing to the overwhelming body of evidence presented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). For many, the Bali conference offered hope of international action. **Olive Heffernan** caught up with IPCC chairman Rajendra Pachauri midway through to find out his views on the state of play in Bali and beyond.

**B**ali, Indonesia — Since being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with former US vice president Al Gore for their work on climate change, the IPCC has become something of a household name. Its chairman, Rajendra Pachauri, or 'Patchy' as he is known to friends, has come as close to celebrity as is possible in science. With the recognition come constant requests — not least for interviews from pushy journalists, I imagine.

We meet in the lobby of the palatial Aston Bali Resort and Spa, where during our brief meeting he is stopped and congratulated by virtually every passer-by. He humbly reminds his admirers that the winning work was that of the many hundreds of scientists who make up the UN body on climate change.

I query whether he ever tires of the praise, but he admits that he's a sucker for it — and says it's unlikely to last longer than a few weeks anyhow. If anything, he seems to take from it a renewed vigour for communicating the urgency of global warming, a task at which he is certainly adept.

The IPCC has been assessing the status of climate change for nearly 20 years. This November it issued a synthesis report, the result of almost two years' work, that serves as a primer on the scientific understanding of climate change.

The synthesis is not merely a summary of the three latest reports released by the panel in the first half of 2007, which respectively describe in detail the science of climate change, its impacts, and options for dealing with it. In addition, the neat 23-page briefing clearly sets out the consequences of various courses of action. The IPCC presentation at the plenary session in Bali brought that work formally into the UN negotiating process.

Notably, at this round of UN talks on climate change, the thirteenth conference of its type, no one is questioning the science. A few lonely-looking sceptics can be seen outside handing out flyers



IPCC

Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the IPCC

and openly admitting, "We're the least popular people here."

Pachauri believes that the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize has convinced people of the magnitude of the issue. "It brings home that climate change is an issue that affects the future of humanity and a dimension that people haven't really thought about previously — if we don't deal with this in time, it could become an issue of peace and national security," he says.

## TANGIBLE TARGETS

Possibly the biggest question in Bali is whether all of the talking will lead to some concrete, legally enforced emissions reductions. Under the Kyoto Protocol, about three dozen developed nations are required to cut their greenhouse gases by an average of five percent below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. But these targets, which signatories are unlikely to meet, are not nearly bold enough to

address climate change effectively.

In the first week of the conference, a group of the world's most prominent climatologists, all with the IPCC, warned negotiators that avoiding dangerous climate change requires stabilizing atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations at the equivalent of 450 parts per million of carbon dioxide and cutting emissions to half of 1990 levels by 2050. I ask Pachauri whether he agrees with their statement and he diplomatically responds that he sees no harm in it, but that "it's for the negotiating community to decide where to stabilize".

As chair of the IPCC, a body that informs government about the likely results of different policies rather than advising which course of action to take, Pachauri passes on making policy recommendations. But he adds, "The findings are very clear — if we allow the temperature [rise] to exceed 2 °C, there will be serious implications."

And he warns that we may already have reached a level of dangerous climate change in some regions. Taking small island nations and sub-Saharan Africa as examples, he says, "If you went there, you would think that we've already crossed that threshold."

Apart from the tangible decisions that will conclude the negotiations, he feels that what is critically important at the conference "is the determination to move ahead", which is "only gaining momentum and will develop in the next few days".

At the end of the two weeks of political wrangling, Pachauri says he will be "happy if we have an agreement well in place so that implementation can begin in 2012". His Peace Prize co-winner Gore is hoping for more ambitious action and has urged that the deadline for implementation of a Kyoto successor be shifted forward by two years.

## ON THE HOME FRONT

Several signs are emerging, however, that determination may not translate into bold action. As the world's greatest emitter and

the only industrialized nation not to have ratified Kyoto, the US may block progress at the Bali talks. Without a strong US commitment, other nations are reluctant to adopt legal cuts in emissions that they fear could hurt economic growth, especially if a major competitor has an unfair advantage.

Pachauri isn't persuaded that nations should allow this to weigh heavily in their decisions here. "It's not necessary for the US administration to take a position different to what it's been saying up until now. If I was in the position of the EU, I would look at what's happening on the ground in the US, where action on climate change is snowballing," he says.

On the home front, Pachauri feels that his native India has gained momentum toward acting on climate change since the release of the IPCC reports this year. Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh this summer set up an advisory council on climate change. Pachauri notes that China has also moved forward on the issue, having developed a national strategy of its own, but he says that it will take a few months for either of these approaches to develop into concrete action.

Much to the chagrin of representatives of nongovernmental organizations and developed nations such as Canada, Australia and Japan, it looks increasingly unlikely that either China or India will be required to agree to binding emissions targets at the talks in Bali.

## BALI AND BEYOND

After just two days in Bali, Pachauri will make his way to Oslo, where he is to collect the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the IPCC and revel in the three days of ceremony that accompany the award.

He sees it as more than a celebration, though. It is an opportunity for action.

"I hope that delegates watching from Bali will be persuaded of the need for action and that it will lead to a positive outcome," says Pachauri.

He is often asked how he feels about travelling so much for work, and replies, "If I can persuade a few thousand or maybe even a few million people of the urgency of climate change, then the reduction in their carbon footprints will more than offset mine."

He further explains, "I feel I'd be failing in my duty if I didn't use this opportunity to do that." Besides, he says, "I'm enjoying what I'm doing now and I want to continue to focus on spreading the message of climate change and the work of the IPCC to the world." His term of office as chair of the IPCC runs until September 2008, and right now



DAVID STEVEN

The Bali Convention Centre, which hosted the 2007 UN Climate Change Conference.

that is his sole focus. "I'm not looking beyond that," he says.

As someone who has been involved in climate change since the Kyoto Protocol was conceived, Pachauri is concerned that the clock is ticking on the opportunity to act. "I am very worried that we are running out of time. Fifteen years have gone by since Kyoto and nothing that has happened since gives us a sense of confidence."

He is optimistic that Bali will be the turning point that is so urgently needed.

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## Update

At the end of a grueling two weeks of talks in Bali, marked by heated arguments, threats of trade sanctions and boycotts, and even tears, a deal was finally reached on how to proceed with climate negotiations over the next two years. After a historic moment in which developing countries took a united stand against the US, a deal was agreed more than a day past the official deadline. The memorable moment came when, in midst of discussions on the level of financial commitment required from developed nations in assisting technology transfer, Papua New Guinea's representative Kevin Conrad said defiantly to the US, "If you cannot lead, leave it to the rest of us. Get out of the way." The US conceded and joined the consensus. But keeping the US at the table also involved a major compromise: the removal of a specific reference to emissions reductions from the Bali agreement. The reference, which

was strongly supported by the EU and developing nations, had recognized the need for developed countries to slash emissions to 25–40% below 1990 levels by 2020. But the final document merely acknowledged "the urgency to address climate change as indicated in the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change", with a footnote to the latest IPCC report.

Some feel that removal of the numerical reference from the text means that the Bali roadmap lacks substance, whereas others believe that Bali succeeded by reaching an agreement that includes all nations in further discussions — and one that has an end date after the current US administration leaves office. Whether Bali has succeeded only in bringing the world's largest emitter back to the table, at the expense of achieving real emissions reductions, remains to be seen.