

Why 2021 could be turning point for tackling climate change



CALIFORNIA: Countries only have only a limited time in which to act if the world is to stave off the worst effects of climate change. Here are five reasons why 2021 could be a crucial year in the fight against global warming. Covid-19 was the big issue of 2020, there is no question about that. But I'm hoping that, by the end of 2021, the vaccines will have kicked in and we'll be talking more about climate than the coronavirus.

2021 will certainly be a crunch year for tackling climate change. Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General, told me he thinks it is a "make or break" moment for the issue. So, in the spirit of New Year's optimism, here's why I believe 2021 could confound the doomsters and see a breakthrough in global ambition on climate.

In November 2021, world leaders will be gathering in Glasgow for the successor to the landmark Paris meeting of 2015. Paris was important because it was the first time virtually all the nations of the world came together to agree they all needed to help tackle the issue. The problem was the commitments countries made to

cutting carbon emissions back then fell way short of the targets set by the conference. In Paris, the world agreed to avoid the worst impacts of climate change by trying to limit global temperature increases to 2C above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century. The aim was to keep the rise to 1.5C if at all possible.

The planet in our handsimage copyright/Getty Images We are way off track. On current plans the world is expected to breach the 1.5C ceiling within 12 years or less and to hit 3C of warming by the end of the century.

Under the terms of the Paris deal, countries promised to come back every five years and raise their carbon-cutting ambitions. That was due to happen in Glasgow in November 2020. The pandemic put paid to that and the conference was bumped forward to this year.

So, Glasgow 2021 gives us a forum at which those carbon cuts can be ratcheted up. 2. Countries are already signing up to deep carbon cuts And there has already been progress. The most important announcement on climate change last year came completely out of the blue.

At the UN General Assembly in September, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, announced that China aimed to go carbon neutral by 2060. Environmentalists were stunned. Cutting carbon has always been seen as an expensive chore yet here was the most polluting nation on earth - responsible for some 28% of world emissions - making an unconditional commitment to do just that regardless of whether other countries followed its lead.

That was a complete turnaround from past negotiations, when everyone's fear was that they might end up incurring the cost of decarbonising their own economy, while others did nothing but still enjoyed the climate change fruits of their labour. The UK was the first major economy in the world to make a legally binding net zero commitment in June 2019. The European Union followed suit in March 2020. Since then, Japan and South Korea have joined what the UN estimates is now a total of over 110 countries that have set net zero target for mid-century. Together, they represent more than 65% of global emissions and more than 70% of the world economy, the UN says.

With the election of Joe Biden in the United States, the biggest economy in the world has now re-joined the carbon cutting chorus. These countries now need to detail how they plan to achieve their lofty new aspirations - that will be a key part of the agenda for Glasgow - but the fact that they are already saying they want to get there is a very significant change. There is a good reason why so many countries are now saying they plan to go net zero: the collapsing cost of renewables is completely changing the calculus of decarbonisation.

In October 2020, the International Energy Agency, an intergovernmental organisation, concluded that the best solar power schemes now offer "the cheapest source of electricity in history". Renewables are already often cheaper than fossil fuel power in much of the world when it comes to building new power stations.

And, if the nations of the world ramp up their investments in wind, solar and batteries in the next few years, prices are likely to fall even further to a point where they are so cheap it will begin to make commercial sense to shut down and replace existing coal and gas power stations. That is because the cost of renewables follows the logic of all manufacturing - the more you produce, the cheaper it gets. It's like pushing on an open door - the more you build the cheaper it gets and the cheaper it gets the more you build. Think what this means: investors won't need to be bullied by green activists into doing the right thing, they will just follow the money.

And governments know that by scaling up renewables in their own economies, they help to accelerate the energy transition globally, by making renewables even cheaper and more competitive everywhere.

The coronavirus pandemic has shaken our sense of invulnerability and reminded us that it is possible for our world to be upended in ways we cannot control. It has also delivered the most significant economic shock since the Great Depression.

In response, governments are stepping forward with stimulus packages designed to reboot their economies. And the good news is it has rarely - if ever - been cheaper for governments to make these kind of investments. Around the world, interest rates are hovering around zero, or even negative. This creates an unprecedented opportunity to - in the now familiar phrase - "build back better". The European Union and Joe Biden's new administration in the US have promised trillions of dollars of green investments to get their economies going and kick-start the process of decarbonisation.

Both are saying they hope other countries will join them - helping drive down the cost of renewables globally. But they are also warning that alongside this carrot, they plan to wield a stick - a tax on imports of countries that emit too much carbon. The idea is this may help induce carbon-cutting laggards - like Brazil, Russia, Australia and Saudi Arabia - to come onside too.

The bad news is that, according to the UN, developed nations are spending 50% more on sectors linked to fossil fuels than on low-carbon energy. The falling cost of renewable and the growing public pressure for action on climate is also transforming attitudes in business.

There are sound financial reasons for this. Why invest in new oil wells or coal power stations that will become obsolete before they can repay themselves over their 20-30-year life? Indeed, why carry carbon risk in their portfolios at all? The logic is already playing out in the markets. This year alone, Tesla's rocketing share price has made it the world's most valuable car company.

Meanwhile, the share price of Exxon - once the world's most valuable company of any kind - fell so far that it got booted out of the Dow Jones Industrial Average of major US corporations. At the same time there is growing momentum behind the movement to get businesses to embed climate risk into their financial decision making. The aim is to make it mandatory for businesses and investors to show that their activities and investments are making the necessary steps to

Bird charity warns of harm from new wind farm



LONDON: The bird charity RSPB has criticised a government decision to permit an offshore wind farm expected to harm birds feeding in the North Sea.

The giant Hornsea Three development lies 75 miles away from Flamborough Head, England's biggest sea bird colony on the Yorkshire coast. The RSPB says kittiwakes will need to fly through the area, dodging turbines, to reach feeding grounds.

The developers have promised to compensate for the impact on the birds. They plan to do this by building four bespoke nesting towers to encourage them on land. But the RSPB says it will take a decade to see whether this idea works - and that will be too late because the wind farms will be up and running by then.

The wind farm dilemma Wind farms are not a straightforward subject for the RSPB in its efforts to protect the UK's birds.

The charity supports the growth of renewable energy to combat the effects of climate change, but is fearful of the impact on birds round the coasts as turbines increase to fulfil the prime minister's promise of powering every home by wind energy.

Duncan Clark from developers Orsted said: "Climate change remains a very serious threat to our environment and habitats and there is an ever-pressing need to

act. "Hornsea Three could provide clean power to over two million UK homes and offset over 128.2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over its lifetime."

The RSPB says computer modelling suggests the huge turbines, stretching over 200 metres, will cause the deaths of 73 kittiwakes a year. Can we compensate for bird deaths? Mr Clark said that the firm would offset the projected



deaths by building four artificial kittiwake nest towers on land, which should prompt an equal number of the birds to be born.

But the RSPB says the compensation measures proposed at Hornsea Three are speculative, and that like other wind developments in the North Sea, they are undermined by a lack of reliable data. Birds, including Guillemots, perched on a cliff faceimage copyrightRSPB The RSPB's Andrew Dodd told BBC News: "We

have no idea whether this plan will work or not. We don't know how many birds are being killed in the first place and we certainly don't know how many of them may be encouraged by breeding towers."

He said kittiwakes had been struggling for three decades - partly because climate change is altering fish patterns and partly because of over-fishing of slim fish called sand eels, which are ground into fishmeal for salmon and pigs. Energy Secretary Alok Sharma acknowledged in his ruling on the development that wildlife would be harmed by Hornsea Three, but he granted consent on the balance of benefits.

His ruling said: "The adverse impacts... do not outweigh the significant benefits of the development in respect of contribution it would make to meeting the identified need for renewable electricity generation." How do

wildlife and clean energy.

Mr Dodd said: "The government has to lead on this. We clearly need loads more offshore wind, and the RSPB supports that. But the North Sea is filling up with turbines and we have to avoid development in the most sensitive areas. We need much better knowledge. "This issue is cumulative - maybe one wind farm wouldn't make a great deal of difference, but the scale of the plans is massive."

Do regulators need more funding? The wind farm industry group Renewable UK anticipates that offshore wind turbine operators will face increasing scrutiny in the coming decade - both in terms of their impact on wildlife and the structures needed on sensitive coastlines to bring the power onshore. The group has urged the government to restore funding to the heavily-cut Natural England, so it can adequately supervise developments.

Renewable UK's Melanie Onn told BBC News: "We urgently need to build new offshore wind farms to tackle climate change which poses the biggest threat to our way of life. "Advisory bodies like Natural England need more funding from the government so that they can take decisions in a more timely manner." Can technology help? Some turbines off the coast of Scotland are now being fitted with cameras on the tower and blades to monitor bird strikes, although this may be very challenging in rough weather.

In the US, a study suggested that painting one of the three blades black seemed to help birds avoid contact - but the RSPB says that study was on an onshore turbine, and needs verification.

Another scheme has seen wind farms turned off when the approach of rare condors is detected through radio transmitters they carry. This only works for threatened condor but the US

birds navigate wind farms? Kittiwakes appear to try to slalom their way through the wind farms that are springing up across the North Sea.

Other birds such as guillemots and razor bills seem to fly round the thickets of turbines, a journey which uses energy that could otherwise be used for breeding.

The RSPB and wind farm association Renewable UK both blame the government for failing to mitigate the conflict between

Hacked home cams used to livestream police raids in swatting attacks



MOSCOW: Hackers have livestreamed police raids on innocent households after hijacking their victims' smart home devices and making a hoax call to the authorities, the FBI has warned. It said offenders had even spoken to responding officers via the hacked kit.

It marks the latest escalation of a crime known as "swatting", in which offenders fool armed police or other emergency responders to go to a target's residence.

The FBI said there were "deadly" risks. A fake call about a hostage situation led to police shooting a man in Kansas three years ago, and there have been non-fatal injuries in other cases. The FBI said it believed the latest twist on the "prank" was able to be carried out because the victims had reused passwords from other services when setting up their smart devices. Lists of hacked credentials are frequently bought and sold via illegal markets.

And offenders often run the details stolen from one service through others to find where passwords have been reused.

There have also been reports of security flaws in some products, including smart doorbells, which have allowed hackers to steal network passwords and gain access to other smart devices sharing the same wi-fi. The apps and websites used to set up such products often store the user's name and address in their account settings in order to offer location-

specific services. "The [perpetrators] call emergency services to report a crime," the alert issued by the FBI states.

"The offender watches the livestream footage and engages with the responding police through the camera and speakers. In some cases, the offender also livestreams the incident on shared online community platforms." The notice does not refer to any specific incident, but there have been related press reports in recent weeks. In November, NBC News highlighted a case in which police went to a Florida home after receiving a fake 911 call from a man saying he had killed his wife and was hoarding explosives.

When they left the building after discovering it to be a hoax, officers reported hearing someone insult them via the property's internet-connected Ring doorbell. In another incident the same month in Virginia, police reported hearing the hacker shout "help me" after arriving at the home of a person they had told might be about to kill himself.

When they questioned the attacker via the device, he claimed to have compromised four different cameras at the location and to be charging others \$5 to watch online. "After this we'll log out, tell him to change his Yahoo password, his Ring password, and stop using the same passwords for the same [stuff]," the offender was quoted as saying by local news station WHAS11. —AFP

Apple executes New Year's Eve apps purge in China

NEW YORK: Apple kicked tens of thousands of products off the Chinese version of its App Store on the final day of the year to meet Beijing's demands. The bulk of them were unlicensed games. But civil rights campaigners have said the company needs to be more transparent about why some other apps have been removed ahead of a 31 December deadline.

The US tech firm has previously said that it is subject to local rules but sometimes challenges takedown orders. "Apple is finally catching up with the regulations that are already enforced on China's many Android stores," Craig Chapple, an analyst at market research firm Sensor Tower, told the BBC.

"The firm may have felt pressure from Chinese authorities, which for years have been increasingly enforcing these rules." Apple removed about 46,000 apps from its store on New Year's Eve, according to analysis by research firm Qimai, of which

85% were games. It said they included Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed Identity and the basketball simulation NBA 2K20, among more obscure titles. China introduced a law four years ago saying that games must have been granted an official licence number in order to be sold in the country.

Foreign companies were banned from selling games directly to consumers, and had to partner with local firms to do so.

Even then, they can be hard to come by. China's National Press and Publication Administration's website indicates it has only granted 97 video game import licences this year, some of which were for games consoles rather than apps. Apple had originally indicated it would enforce a 31 July deadline, but later extended this to 31 December.

The App In China consultancy said that publishers had previously exploited a loophole whereby the iPhone-maker requested a developer's licence number but did not ver-

ify it, meaning any number could be submitted to its system. Sensor Tower said Apple had already removed at least 94,000 apps from its China store this year prior to Christmas. Google is not affected as Android devices sold within the country do not use its Play Store, and local marketplaces have already taken their own steps to be compliant.

Beyond games, Chinese censors have also been waging a campaign against apps used for fraud, pornography, prostitution, gambling and violence, in addition to those that contain politically sensitive information or other content deemed to be illegal. A crackdown earlier this month led to a ban of the American travel app TripAdvisor among dozens of others. Apple regularly publishes a tally of the number of apps it has been ordered to remove in the country, but does not name the products involved. One Washington-based group has said the firm needs to

