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Government Must End IPCC Criticism And Get Real About Climate Crisis

Environment Ministry's continued attacks on IPCC reveal government's ignorance about the panel's functioning and lack of concern about severity and scale of the climate crisis.

Climate Revolution Initiative deplores the attempt by the Environment Ministry to insinuate that the IPCC reports are influenced by a single interest group and that contrasting voices are silenced. We call upon the government to come out from its state of denial about climate science and get real about the scale of the crisis that confronts us.

News reports in print media today indicate that the Minister of Environment & Forests, Jairam Ramesh, has written to the council that is reviewing IPCC procedures suggesting that contrary scientific opinion on the conclusions of IPCC must be included in the report implying that there is active suppression of scientific opinion within the panel.

The note even accorded legitimacy to climate denialists movement by suggesting that the panel's draft report should be sent to all known "climate sceptics" during the review process. Climate sceptics is a moderate term for individuals and groups denying that climate change represents a crisis. Past investigations have shown parts of the denialists movement to be funded by energy firms such as Exxon Mobil and their lobbying institutions.

Coming from a top government minister rather than a media outlet, these are serious and unfortunate accusations. They suggest that even three years after publication of IPCC Fourth Assessment report (AR4) and in spite of the government being signatory to the panel, it remains deeply ignorant about IPCC's functioning and unconcerned about the climate crisis.

It might surprise the Minister of Environment to learn that IPCC functions on the basis of

consensus and therefore, by definition, cannot be controlled or dominated by a single interest group. Consensus driven decision making is deeply ingrained in the IPCC principles and procedures. Wherever it is not possible to arrive at consensus, the disagreements are noted in the reports. This can be easily looked up in parts of the reports that describe the level of confidence in its statements.

Apart from this, there is a separate layer of checks and balances in the form of government representatives that constitute the panel. For all the scientists on IPCC's panel there are an equal number of government minders whose job is to check and recheck every statement in the summaries for policymakers written by the scientists and sending them back for review or edits if found to be inaccurate. These processes virtually guarantee that IPCC does not overstate or exaggerate facts.

Manu Sharma, founder of Climate Revolution Initiative said, "Clearly, Jairam Ramesh has become a victim of the campaign run by vested interests in selected media outlets to discredit the IPCC. This actually doesn't surprise us because RTI applications filed by our group show that the Minister of Environment does not receive any regular updates on climate science from its ministry or any related ministry."

In a RTI disclosure made in late February, Climate Revolution Initiative published replies received from the Ministry of Environment, Department of Science & Technology, the Principal Scientific Advisor to the government and the Ministry of Earth Sciences. The documents show that none of these institutions have any process in place to send briefs or advisories on international developments in climate science to the Minister of Environment or the Prime Minister.

Other RTI applications show that even exceptional climate anomalies and notable scientific papers on climate science do not surface in the ministry's records. There is in fact no capacity within the Environment Ministry to proactively monitor international developments in climate science and take them to policymakers. This ensures that the union minister of State for Environment, Jairam Ramesh remains ignorant of the widespread sense of urgency about the state of global climate in scientific circles.

Presumably, the only source from which minister of environment gets his climate science updates is news outlets of questionable credibility.

Manu Sharma said, "Had the minister been briefed about reports from credible scientific sources published just over the last one year, he would have seen key messages emerging

from International Scientific Congress Climate Change convened in March, UNEP's Climate Change Compendium released in September, and the Copenhagen Diagnosis published in November -- all of which show that the IPCC reports are actually deeply conservative, not overblown exaggerations as parts of media have tried to project."

This conservatism emerges from the same consensus driven process described above and from the fact that IPCC fourth assessment report had a 2005 cut off date for inclusion of scientific papers. A lot of scientific evidence published in peer-reviewed scientific journals over the past five years succeeding AR4 submission date show that its worst projections (or even worse) are turning out to be true.

At Climate Revolution Initiative we contend that there is certainly a need for reform in the IPCC process but it is to make the panel free from government interference and for it to have a process in place to continually update itself. We do not require any changes in IPCC procedures that would burden it with extra layers of scrutiny further watering down scientific findings.

While the IPCC mistake in the case of Himalayan glacial retreat is unfortunate, it is clear that it happened as established processes were not followed. IPCC unfortunately relied on sources that were not peer-reviewed. However, this remains more of an exception than the rule. As recent scientific evidence show, most of IPCC mistakes are underestimates.

The note by the Minister of Environment also contends that IPCC must make greater efforts to "enhance the participation of developing country scientists to improve the geographical balance of its reports."

This statement once again emphasizes Jairam Ramesh's favourite, yet bizarre, theme of nationalism of science that often surfaces in his talks suggesting that "western science" (his term) is somehow influenced by the political interests of developed countries.

While being completely unfounded and quite bizarre, it also disregards the paucity of Indian research on climate change published in scientific journals. Out of thousands of papers published on climate science in international peer-reviewed journals over the last few years, one would be lucky to find more than a few dozen authored by scientists based in Indian research institutions.

At Climate Revolution Initiative we have serious concern that India's environment minister -- whose repeated attacks on the world's premier scientific body on climate change border on libel; who remains ignorant of the fundamental principles driving IPCC's functioning; who legitimizes

climate denialists; who makes bizarre distinction between "national" and "western" science; and who demonstrates no understanding of the severity and scale of the climate crisis -- may not be fit to continue on the position of head of the ministry that holds the momentous responsibility of ensuring that the world's most populous country of the future successfully mitigates most of the effects of climate change and adapts to others.

Regardless, we call for the environment ministry to reform its processes, educate its staff and drastically alter its policies so that the real science behind climate change is embraced and acted upon with the same measure of urgency that it represents.

About Climate Revolution

Climate Revolution Initiative is a series of ambitious proposals and initiatives that can potentially transform the social and political climate on climate change in India and be replicated in any part of the world. Unlike environmental groups, Climate Revolution Initiative argues that there is no possibility that the climate crisis can be addressed through the UNFCCC process. The ambitious initiative aims to educate and mobilise the public to force the governments to change. Climate Revolution Initiative was founded by Manu Sharma, an activist and renewable energy expert. Details about its RTI Initiative, including scanned replies from various govt. authorities, are available on www.climaterevolution.net/rti