

'Demon oil' on the defensive over climate change

13 September 2019, by Dana Moukhallati



Indian Oil Minister Dharmendra Pradhan (L) listens as the United Arab Emirates Energy Minister Suheil al-Mazrouei (R) addresses the World Energy Congress (WEC) in the Emirati capital Abu Dhabi

At the dawn of an era scientists have dubbed the Anthropocene, driven by human impact on the planet, the energy industry's four-yearly gathering was forced onto the defensive on climate change.

With the burning of "demon" fossil fuels blamed for playing havoc in the "age of man", many agreed that after decades of energy wars, future conflicts would be driven by competition for [clean water](#) as the glaciers recede and rivers dry up.

Asked what the biggest source of world tension would be in 2040, more than half the energy professionals and officials polled at this week's World Energy Congress in Abu Dhabi nominated water scarcity.

"Ten years ago or 20 years ago oil would have been on the top of the list for sure," said Adnan Shihab-Eldin of Kuwait, the former acting secretary general of OPEC.

"Now it's not because of two factors: we have more resources throughout the world especially through technology... and the resources are more evenly distributed," he told the World Energy Congress.

But like many other leaders and executives at the conference he insisted that given predicted [global demand](#) over coming decades, that could be reversed by an excessively rapid and unplanned switch to renewable sources of power.

"We all agree that what we want is a clean energy future. Getting to that clean energy future and the speed that we get there must be kept open," he said, warning of "volatilities and crisis" if [policy decisions](#) were made in haste.

"It's wrong in my view to set a policy that will impact for 40 years, saying for example not only that I don't want nuclear for myself... but I don't want nuclear for everyone else."

"So it's important to keep all our options open, to invest in all them, depending on our local situation."

Last chance

Gulf nations have invested tens of billions of dollars in clean energy projects, mainly in solar and nuclear. But critics say many are slow to get off the [drawing board](#) and that political will is lacking.

The addiction to oil is a powerful one, particularly when supplies remain abundant, and the switch to renewables is enormously costly.

But the Global Commission on Adaptation said Tuesday that countries rich and poor must invest now to protect against the effects of [climate change](#) or pay an even heavier price later.

"We are the last generation that can change the course of climate change, and we are the first generation that then has to live with the

consequences," said former UN chief Ban Ki-Moon, who chairs the commission.

Failure to curb the [greenhouse gas emissions](#) slow-roasting the planet has already unleashed a crescendo of deadly heat waves, water shortages and superstorms made more destructive by rising seas.

Earth's [average surface temperature](#) has gone up 1C since the late 19th century, and is on track—at current rates of CO2 emissions—to warm another two or three degrees by the century's end.

"We are the biggest influencing factor on nature these days," Martin Frick, senior policy director at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, said at a panel discussion in Abu Dhabi.

"As they say, with great power comes great responsibility."

One of the leading lights at the World Energy Congress, Aramco CEO Amin Nasser, has spoken of a "crisis of perception" facing the industry and a growing risk the financial community will turn against [fossil fuels](#).

During the week he led calls for an "orderly" shift and criticism of knee-jerk policies.

"All [energy](#) transitions—including this one—take decades, with many challenges along the road," said the boss of the Saudi oil giant which is preparing for a stock market debut that will raise billions of dollars.

The UN's Frick said that diplomacy on climate change was still working despite the difficulties.

"There is an urgent need for that," he said. "The impacts are absolutely alarming, and no matter how much we negotiate, there is no negotiating with nature."

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