

350-degree turnabout needed in climate change talks

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Ehud Zion Waldoks , THE JERUSALEM POST

"The only thing that has changed in the last 20 years is that global warming is coming sooner and on a larger scale than anyone thought," US writer-turned-activist Bill McKibben told young environmental activists on a Tel Aviv rooftop on Monday night.

"Two years ago, 25 percent of the Arctic ice melted over the summer. In Banaris, India, the glacier at the head of the Ganges is melting. It could be gone by 2035. Four hundred million people depend on the Ganges for water and agriculture. One in three human beings on the planet lives downstream from those glaciers," the prophet-like self-described "professional downer" told the group in an American twang.

McKibben, who was born in 1960, rose to prominence in the US as a major activist against global warming two years ago, when he and his team organized what eventually became 1,400 demonstrations against global warming on a single day, April 14, 2007.

For years, McKibben has been an active writer on the topic - he wrote what is perhaps the first book on global warming, *The End of Nature*, 20 years ago.

He was in Israel for a two-day visit to encourage local efforts in his newest global campaign - "350." He was in South Africa last week and was flying to Mexico City on Tuesday.



McKibben became a grassroots activist a few years ago after visiting Bangladesh during an outbreak

of dengue fever.

"I was there and I got bitten. I didn't die but lots of others did. The Earth's temperature has already risen one degree [celsius]. The mosquitoes that carry Dengue fever thrive in hotter conditions and Dengue fever is up 200% across Asia in the last decade.

"I looked at all those people and thought to myself, 'They did absolutely nothing to cause this' and that's when it really hit home," he recalled.

"I live in Vermont and I called up a bunch of writer friends and said let's go protest in Burlington on the steps of the Capitol building until they arrest us and take us away and that'll generate some publicity for the issue.

"Well, one of my friends called up the police to see what they would do if we protested and they said, 'You can stay there as long as you like.' So we had to think of something else," he said self-deprecatingly.

That "something else" turned into a march on Burlington which in turn spawned the 1,400 events, which in turn has led to McKibben's latest efforts - 350.

He has been rushing across the globe, trying to inspire activists to stage demonstrations based on the number 350 on October 24, 2009. The idea is to raise awareness and catch the eye of world leaders ahead of the climate talks in Copenhagen in December, where a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol for the reduction of greenhouse gases is to be worked out.

What's 350? It stands for 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. That's the number climatologist Dr. James Hansen and his team at NASA came up with 18 months ago as the maximum amount of CO₂ the atmosphere can hold for the Earth to remain the way we've always known it.

If it reaches 450 or higher, then the Earth's temperatures will rise and bring about massive changes to the planet's basic structures. Ice will melt, the sea will become much more acidic, weather patterns will change and other effects will be felt, McKibben warned.

"Right now, we are at 390 ppm. We are past the point where we can solve it one house or even one country at a time. We have to solve it globally. Going backward is the biggest physical challenge humanity has ever faced," he said.

"How do we get back? Think of a bathtub. There is a drain - the forests and oceans can absorb and store carbon, and we can even speed that up. We just have to stop pouring carbon in on the top of the tub. We need to do a forced march away from fossil fuels," he said.

"For millions of years, the carbon from Earth's life forms was stored deep below the ground [in the form of oil, coal and natural gas]. Now, we've dug that up and are releasing it into the atmosphere at incredible rates over the last several decades," was his thumbnail sketch of the causes of global warming.

McKibben hopes that by holding thousands of events all over the world next month, decision-makers will realize that there is support for drastic change to combat global warming. The 350 figure is lower than what most countries are discussing as the goal for the new protocol.

McKibben is aware of that, but "we need to have a serious agreement worked out in Copenhagen.

We won't get to 350, but we have to make sure the negotiations keep going. After Kyoto, people just walked away as if they were saying 'problem solved.' We can't let that happen again."

There are already three events scheduled for October 24 in Israel, and others in the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies is planning an event near Eilat. The Tel Aviv Rollers will also be having an event in the coastal metropolis.

Friends of the Earth Middle East is organizing a joint Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian event at the Dead Sea. The NGO hopes to bring hundreds if not thousands down to create the numbers 350, one number on each side of the sea.

Coincidentally, the Torah portion of the week for that Saturday October 24, is Noah, where the story of the Flood is recounted.

For more information, visit www.350.org

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