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MediaTitle	Sunday Borneo Post (KK)		
Date	24 Nov 2013	Color	Black/white
Section	World	Circulation	88,150
Page No	A12	Readership	166,173
Language	English	ArticleSize	722 cm ²
Journalist	N/A	AdValue	RM 4,157
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 12,471



Nuclear called a lesser evil than fossil fuels

WASHINGTON: Four prominent climate and energy scientists are calling on environmentalists to rethink their longstanding opposition to nuclear energy, warning that there is no "credible path to climate stabilisation that does not include a substantial role for nuclear power".

The warning comes just ahead of a new round of international climate negotiations, slated to start next week in Poland, aimed at arriving at an international consensus on action to mitigate climate change beyond 2015. Yet observers are increasingly pessimistic that this process will be able to keep the planet's average temperature rise below two degree Celsius by the end of this century, the current stated goal.

The new call comes in the form of a letter sent over the weekend to world leaders, prominent environmentalists and green organisations. Most prominently, it was signed by James Hansen, the former NASA scientist who for decades has written of the dangers posed by climate change; today, he is perhaps the single most recognisable researcher speaking on the issue in the United States.

Also signing on to the call, addressed to "those influencing environmental policy but opposed to nuclear energy", are two additional US scientists, Ken Caldeira and Kerry Emanuel, and one from Australia, Tom Wigley. Each are associated with major research institutions.

"We appreciate your organisation's concern about global warming, and your advocacy of renewable energy. But continued opposition to nuclear power threatens humanity's ability to avoid dangerous climate change," the four state.

"With the planet warming and

carbon dioxide emissions rising faster than ever, we cannot afford to turn away from any technology that has the potential to displace a large fraction of our carbon emissions. Much has changed since the 1970s. The time has come for a fresh approach to nuclear power in the 21st century."

Currently, nuclear energy provides around a fifth of US electricity demand. Globally, that figure is slightly lower, with 30 countries hosting nuclear reactors that provided around 12 per cent of worldwide electricity production, as of 2011.

As of July, around 434 reactors were operating globally, according to the Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI), a US lobby group. In addition, 71 new plants were under construction, including two here in the United States.

In their letter, the four scientists say that while they support renewable forms of electricity production, these methods appear unable to deal with the quickly ramping-up global demands for energy. They also suggest that new nuclear plant designs are cheaper and "much safer" than older reactors, while new incineration methods can "solve the waste disposal problem".

The letter has been embraced by the nuclear industry, which many analysts suggest has been stagnating for years over environmental and safety concerns.

"The letter puts an exclamation point on a phenomenon that has been unfolding for several years, namely the steady growth in support for nuclear energy from leading environmentalists," Marv Fertel, president of the Nuclear Energy Institute, told IPS in a statement.

"Greenhouse gas emissions would be vastly higher if nuclear

energy facilities did not provide 40 per cent of the electricity globally that is produced by

carbon-free sources of power (63 per cent in the United States) ... There is ever-increasing recognition of this analysis."

In fact, the number of environmentalists who have publicly begun advocating for nuclear power in the face of climate change remains quite low, though James Hansen will now be a notable addition.

Among environmentalists, initial reactions to the letter have been adamant, if respectful, rejection.

"(We) respect these scientists, and thank them for their years of service. Unfortunately, we will have to agree to disagree with them on this one," Michael Brune, the executive director of the Sierra Club, a conservation and advocacy group, told IPS.

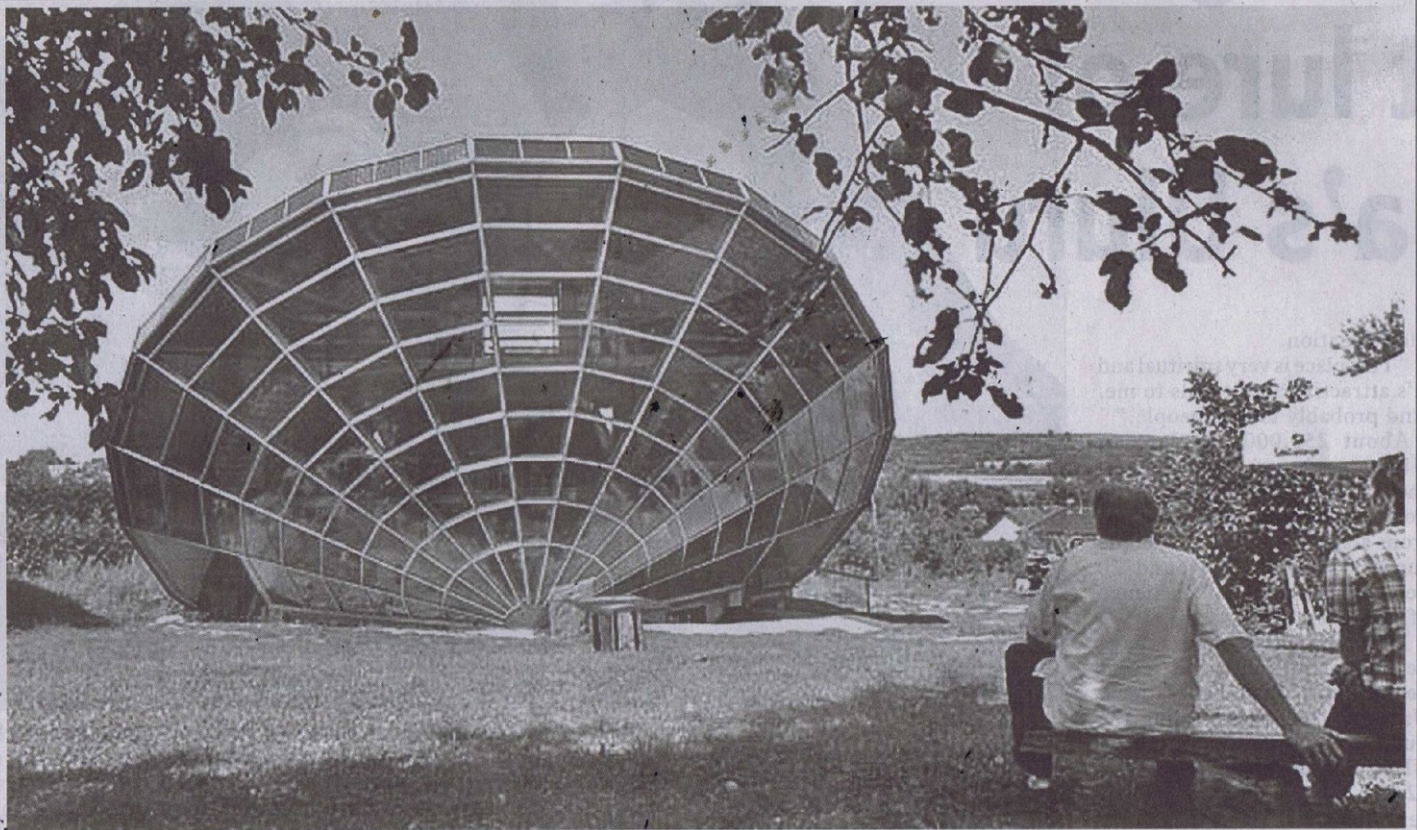
"While we agree that the climate crisis is the most urgent challenge of our time, this group fails to acknowledge that wind, solar and (energy) efficiency are the faster, cheaper and safer way to fight the climate threat."

Brune says nuclear plants are "too expensive, too slow to build, and too risky", while noting that Germany, one of the world's largest economies, is currently decommissioning its nuclear plants while focusing significant funding on renewable energy sources. - IPS

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Four prominent climate and energy scientists

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SOLAR HOUSE: A file picture taken on Aug 17, 2011 in Coşswiller, eastern France, shows people sitting in front of the 'Heliodrome', a bioclimatic solar house designed as a giant three-dimensional sundial, set on a fixed angle in relationship to the sun's movements to provide shade or sunlight depending on the season. 800 young engineers and architects organised into 20 teams from schools and universities from 16 different countries presented yesterday, at the "Cite de l'architecture" in Paris, their projects of sustainable housing, lit and heated by the sun, during the Solar Decathlon 2014 international university competition, which will take place at the end of June 2014 in France. — AFP photo