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Starvation a likely outcome of climate change in Africa

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Guy Rogers ENVIRONMENT & TOURISM EDITOR rogersg@avusa.co.za

Johannesburg – The global community is failing to meet the threat of climate change, says the chairman of the international body researching and tracking the climate change phenomena, Dr Rajendra Pachauri.

Addressing the National Climate Change Summit here on a video clip, Pachauri, of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, said things had gone backwards since the first global commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was signed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 16 years ago.

“Despite that commitment, between 1970 and 2004 emissions rose 70 per cent, and carbon dioxide alone rose 80%.”

Greenhouse gases form a natural layer in the atmosphere which controls radiation and thereby the Earth’s climatic temperature, making the planet habitable. A wide range of human activity, especially the burning of fossil fuels to generate electricity, has hugely increased greenhouse emissions, however, and scientific consensus today is that this process is causing climate change.

The broad prediction is that this change will manifest in storms occurring increasingly often and growing increasingly fierce, ice and snowfields melting and sea levels rising.

In South Africa, it is predicted that the east of the country will become wetter and the west will grow more parched.

Focusing on Africa, Pachauri said the prediction for some countries was that, as early as 2020, agricultural yield would drop by up to 50%.

“In most cases, these are countries where people are already suffering from malnutrition, so this will exacerbate that suffering.”

Also by 2020, largely as a result of climate change, it is expected that between 75 million and 250 million people across the continent will be suffering from “water stress” – a shortage of drinkable water.

“So the predicted effect on the African people and all African species is serious. Tourism will likely decline with the loss of wildlife and wildlife habitat.”

Pachauri was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with former US presidential candidate Al Gore for the work of the IPCC. They have donated the prize money to fund climate change research in poor countries where communities will be worst hit by the phenomenon.

This research focuses on finding ways to adapt to climate change which cannot be stopped, as well as, more fundamentally, ways to stem and reduce emissions. One of the ways to reduce emissions was to “put a price on carbon”, he said. This could be done, for instance, by imposing a tax on emissions above a certain threshold.

Putting a price on carbon would not only directly encourage industries to reduce emissions, but would also see consumers begin to target goods produced through low- carbon processes, he said.