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For Environmental Justice

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Letter to the Editor

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THE EARTH SHOULD NOT BE A CLIMATE LABORATORY

Earth Day on 22nd April this year coincides with the first day of Hari Raya Aidilfitri.

As families gather with friends to celebrate, we must count our blessings that Mother Earth has bestowed upon us, which we often take for granted. Mother Earth's health and well-being is vital for our continued survival and sustenance.

As we witness the alarming onset of climate change impacts and warnings grow louder for speedier and more urgent action across the globe to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius from the pre-industrial era, there have been proliferating calls for manipulating the Earth system with very risky and dangerous solar geo-engineering technologies which are unknown to many, including governments.

The irresponsible idea behind such speculative technologies is that we can continue to plunder, over-consume and pollute our Earth as it is possible to engineer our way out of the current problems.

As highlighted in a recent opinion piece in the New York Times (*April 18, 'My Continent is not your giant climate laboratory' by Chukwumerije Okereke, from a Nigerian University*), one such solar engineering technology, called solar radiation management, gathering the most attention is to use balloons or aircraft to spray large quantities of aerosols — tiny particles of, for example, sulfur dioxide or engineered nanoparticles — into the stratosphere to dim the sunlight.

As pointed out in the article, 'other proposed techniques include covering deserts with plastic; genetically engineering plants to have brighter, more reflective leaves; creating or making clouds whiter; and deploying millions of mirrors in space. The point of all of them is to counter warming by reducing the amount of sunlight reaching the planet and reflecting it back to the stratosphere.'

As highlighted, instead of making investments in developing countries supporting renewable energy and other genuine climate solutions, attention is being diverted by funding geoengineering researchers, particularly those in the United States, with support from Bill Gates and philanthropists from Silicon Valley, while George Soros has recently announced his intention to back solar geoengineering projects in the Arctic.

In fact, recently, an American start-up called Make Sunsets, launched balloons from Mexico to inject sulfur into the atmosphere with the claim this would offset carbon emissions. It seems that the Mexican government was unaware of the exercise until after the event, and officials swiftly announced a ban on solar geoengineering activities.

Developing country governments are being courted by irresponsible researchers and companies to become testing grounds for such dangerous technologies.

To counter these moves and to raise public attention, more than 400 senior climate scientists and scholars from around the world have called for an International Non-Use Agreement on Solar Geoengineering, which hopefully results in a ban on real-world research on this technology.

There is in fact a de facto moratorium under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity on the development and deployment of these technologies and we in Malaysia too must be on the alert and work with other nations to prevent becoming testing grounds, with seductive promises of making money.

We join the call of concerned scientists for immediate political action from governments, the United Nations, and other actors to prevent the normalization of solar geoengineering as a climate policy option.

Governments and the UN must assert effective political control and restrict the development of solar geoengineering technologies at planetary scale.

As highlighted by the scientists' fundamental concerns include the following:

'First, the risks of solar geoengineering are poorly understood and can never be fully known. Impacts will vary across regions, and there are uncertainties about the effects on weather patterns, agriculture, and the provision of basic needs of food and water.

Second, speculative hopes about the future availability of solar geoengineering technologies threaten commitments to mitigation and can disincentivize governments, businesses, and societies to do their utmost to achieve decarbonization or carbon neutrality as soon as possible. The speculative possibility of future solar geoengineering risks becoming a powerful argument for industry lobbyists, climate denialists, and some governments to delay decarbonization policies.

Third, the current global governance system is unfit to develop and implement the far-reaching agreements needed to maintain fair, inclusive, and effective political control over solar geoengineering deployment.

In short, solar geoengineering deployment cannot be governed globally in a fair, inclusive, and effective manner. We therefore call for immediate political action from governments, the United Nations, and other actors to prevent the normalization of solar geoengineering as a climate policy option. Governments and the UN should take effective political control and restrict the development of solar geoengineering technologies before it is too late.'

Specifically, we also call for an International Non-Use Agreement on Solar Geoengineering.

SAM echoes the call that our Earth should not be a climate laboratory! Selamat Hari Raya!

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Sahabat Alam Malaysia