

Climate talks must be rescued from failure, warns UN chief

December 12 2018, by Marlowe Hood

"Key political issues" deadlocking UN climate talks "remain unresolved", UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned Wednesday after an unscheduled stop at the troubled negotiations in Poland.

The fight against [climate change](#) is a "matter of life and death today," he told ministers and delegates at the 195-nation UN forum tasked with beating back the threat of global warming, barely 48 hours before the meeting in the coal town of Katowice was set to adjourn.

The two-week talks are tasked with breathing life into the 2015 Paris Agreement, which vows to cap global warming at "well under" two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

It is also meant to funnel hundreds of billions of dollars to [poor countries](#) already feeling the sting of deadly storms, heatwaves and droughts made worse by climate change.

Scientists have concluded that such impacts are already unmistakable with only 1C of warming so far.

But efforts to elaborate a "rule book" for the Paris pact and to boost the carbon-cutting pledges of all nations have run aground, even as a barrage of scientific reports have warned that only immediate and radical measures can avert catastrophic climate impacts.

"The eyes of the world are upon us," said Guterres, who had not planned to return to the talks after addressing the opening plenary 10 days ago.

"To waste this opportunity would compromise our last best chance to stop runaway climate change," he said.

"It would not only be immoral, it would be suicidal."

A major scientific report called for by the UN [climate](#) body concluded in October that Earth's rise in temperature must be capped even lower—at 1.5C—to avoid the danger of runaway warming.

But a handful of countries at the talks, led by the United States and Saudi Arabia, have blocked efforts to endorse the report, which many developing countries see as essential.

"The IPCC report on 1.5C is the basis for all future action, on what we need to do," Vanuatu Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu told AFP.

Endorsing the report's findings at the conclusion of the UN forum "is a red line issue for us."

Issues bedeviling discussions include "transparency"—which means different things to different countries, depending on what's at stake.

'Ice melts at zero'

Rich nations, for example, are pushing hard for high standards of accounting to keep track of emissions reductions. Poorer nations say they need more time—and lots of money—to comply.

On finance, however, the tables are turned. It is developing countries who decry the opaqueness of financial aid from wealthy countries.

But the most contentious issue on the table is the reluctance of many nations—including the Polish government, which as host presides over the complex negotiations—to underscore the need for countries to enhance voluntary carbon-cutting pledges annexed to the Paris pact.

Even if current promises are fulfilled, Earth would heat up by well over 3C, enough to tug at the fabric of civilisation, say scientists.

"Nobody—not even so-called superpowers—can negotiate with the laws of physics," said Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, a Belgian climatologist and a former vice-chair of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which produced the report on 1.5C.

A recent study mentioned by Guterres showed that parts of the Antarctic ice sheet—which holds enough frozen water to bury every major coastal city in the world—are melting far more quickly than thought only a few years ago.

"Ice melts at zero degrees Celsius—that's 32 degrees Fahrenheit," quipped van Ypersele, converting into the temperature scale used in the United States.

Diplomatic energy at the talks will now focus on hammering out a final text, composed of "decisions," including one adopting the rule book.

In an attempt to get around the stalemate, the Polish government took control of the process to find compromise language on key sticking points.

But a draft text released Wednesday did not inspire enthusiasm among negotiators.

"From what we have seen so far, they have not made any bold moves,"

said Miguel Arias Canete, European Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy.

"The issues with the most political interest to most parties remain unresolved and practically unchanged."

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