

Leaders vow to protect forests, plug methane leaks at COP26

November 2 2021, by Frank Jordans and Jill Lawless



Colorful trees stand near a road through the Taunus region near Frankfurt, Tuesday, Oct. 2, 2021. More than 100 countries are pledging to end deforestation, which scientists say is a major driver of climate change. Britain hailed the commitment as the first big achievement of the United Nations climate conference in Glasgow. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Probst

World leaders promised to protect Earth's forests, cut methane emissions and help South Africa wean itself off coal at the U.N. climate summit Tuesday—part of a flurry of deals intended to avert catastrophic global warming.

Britain hailed the commitment by over 100 countries to end deforestation in the coming decade as the first big achievement of the conference in the Scottish city of Glasgow, known as COP26—but experts noted such promises have been made and broken before.

The U.K. government said it has received commitments from leaders representing more than 85% of the world's forests to halt and reverse deforestation by 2030. Among them are several countries with massive forests, including Brazil, China, Colombia, Congo, Indonesia, Russia and the United States.

More than \$19 billion in public and private funds have been pledged toward the plan.

"With today's unprecedented pledges, we will have a chance to end humanity's long history as nature's conqueror, and instead become its custodian," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said. "Let's end this great chainsaw massacre by making conservation do what we know it can do, and that is deliver long-term sustainable jobs and growth as well."

Experts and observers said fulfilling the pledge will be critical to limiting climate change, but many noted that such grand promises have been made in the past—to little effect.



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson attends a session on Action on Forests and Land Use, during the UN Climate Change Conference COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. Credit: Paul Ellis/Pool Photo via AP

"Signing the declaration is the easy part," U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said on Twitter. "It is essential that it is implemented now for people and planet."

Alison Hoare, a senior research fellow at political think tank Chatham House, said world leaders promised in 2014 to end deforestation by 2030, "but since then deforestation has accelerated across many countries."

Forests are important ecosystems and provide a critical way of absorbing

carbon dioxide—the main greenhouse gas—from the atmosphere. But the value of wood as a commodity and the growing demand for agricultural and pastoral land are leading to widespread and often illegal felling of forests, particularly in developing countries.

"We are delighted to see Indigenous Peoples mentioned in the forest deal announced today," said Joseph Itongwa Mukumo, an Indigenous Walikale and activist from Congo.



The sun begins to rise over the River Clyde outside the venue of the COP26 U.N. Climate Summit in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. The U.N. climate summit in Glasgow gathers leaders from around the world, in Scotland's biggest city, to lay out their vision for addressing the common challenge of global warming. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali

He called for governments and businesses to recognize the effective role Indigenous communities play in preventing deforestation.

Luciana Tellez Chavez, an environmental researcher at Human Right Watch, said the agreement contains "quite a lot of really positive elements."

The EU, Britain and the U.S. are making progress on restricting imports of goods linked to deforestation and human rights abuses, "and it's really interesting to see China and Brazil signing up to a statement that suggests that's a goal," she said.

But she noted that Brazil's public statements don't yet line up with its domestic policies and warned that the deal could be used by some countries to "greenwash" their image.

The Brazilian government has been eager to project itself as a responsible environmental steward in the wake of surging deforestation and fires in the Amazon rainforest and Pantanal wetlands that sparked global outrage and threats of divestment in recent years. But critics caution that its promises should be viewed with skepticism, and the country's president, Jair Bolsonaro, is an outspoken proponent of developing the Amazon.



President of Tanzania Samia Suluhu Hassan attends the UN Climate Change Conference COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. Credit: Hannah McKay/Pool via AP

Brian Rohan, head of forests at environmental law charity ClientEarth, said that to succeed, the pledge "needs teeth." He said that "declaring 'legal' deforestation to be exempt is a false solution."

The founder of Amazon—the company, not the rainforest—announced separately that his philanthropic fund is devoting \$2 billion to fight climate change through landscape restoration and the transformation of agricultural systems.

"We must conserve what we have, restore what we've lost, and grow

what we need in harmony with nature," Jeff Bezos said.

About 130 world leaders are in Glasgow for what host Britain says is the last realistic chance to keep global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels—the goal the world set in Paris six years ago.

Increased warming over coming decades would melt much of the planet's ice, raise global sea levels and greatly increase the likelihood and intensity of extreme weather, scientists say.



Mauritius Prime Minister Pravind Kumar Jugnauth attends a meeting during the UN Climate Change Conference COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. Credit: Phil Noble/Pool via AP

On Monday, the leaders heard stark warnings from officials and activists alike about those dangers. A day later, the British government said commitments made by governments so far were "very encouraging."

But Johnson's spokesman, Max Blain, cautioned: "We are not complacent. This is not a done deal by any means."

On Tuesday, the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden launched a plan to reduce methane emissions, a potent greenhouse gas that contributes significantly to global warming. The announcement was part of a broader effort with the European Union and other nations to reduce overall methane emissions worldwide by 30% by 2030.

Clamping down on methane flaring and leaks from oil wells and gas pipelines—the focus of the Biden plan—is considered one of the easiest ways to cut emissions. Reducing methane produced from agriculture, in particular by belching cows, is a trickier matter.



People gather at a table inside the venue of the COP26 U.N. Climate Summit in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. The U.N. climate summit in Glasgow gathers leaders from around the world, in Scotland's biggest city, to lay out their vision for addressing the common challenge of global warming. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali



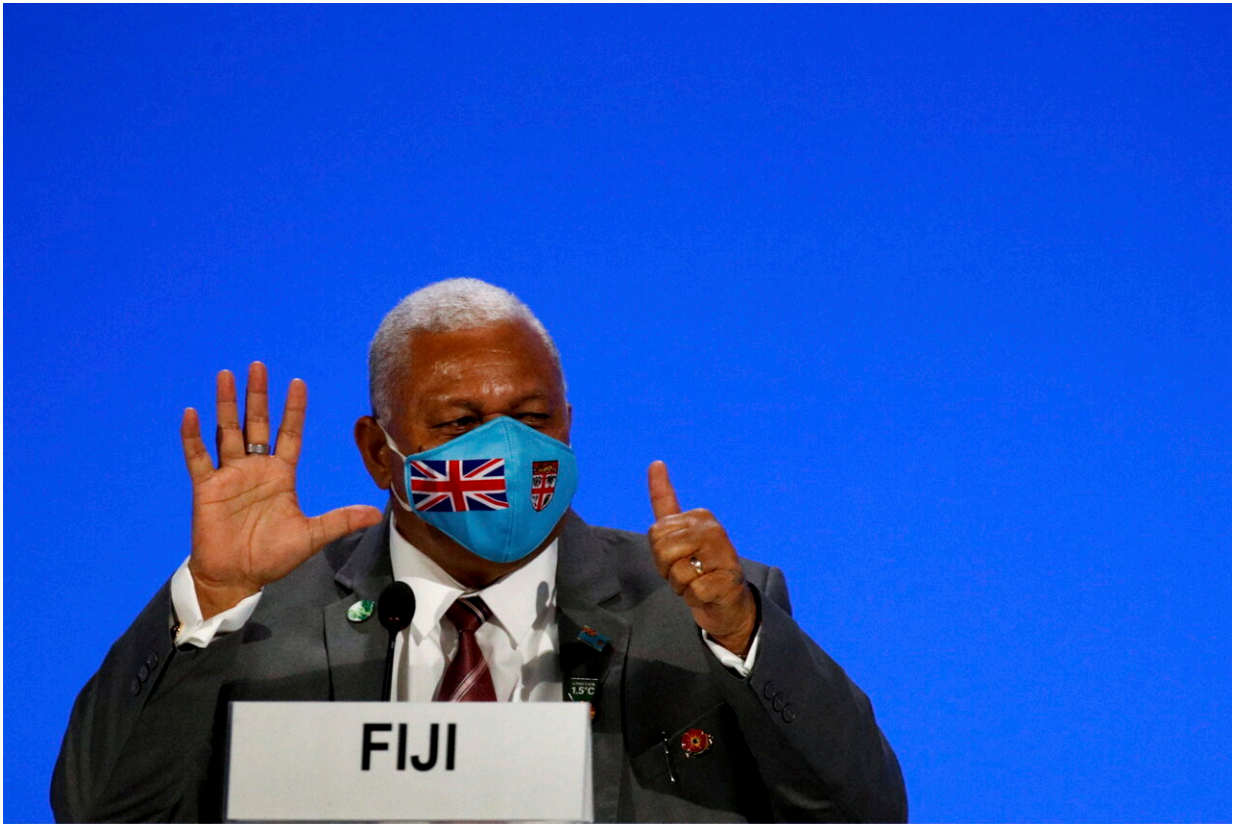
A woman walks by a sign in the French pavilion inside the venue of the COP26 U.N. Climate Summit in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. The U.N. climate summit in Glasgow gathers leaders from around the world, in Scotland's biggest city, to lay out their vision for addressing the common challenge of global warming. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, left, and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi attend a meeting during the UN Climate Change Conference COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. Credit: Phil Noble/Pool via AP



President Joe Biden speaks during a meeting on the "Build Back Better World" initiative at the COP26 U.N. Climate Summit, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021, in Glasgow, Scotland. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



Fiji's Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama attends a meeting during the UN Climate Change Conference COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. Credit: Phil Noble/Pool via AP



Youth climate activist from the Marshall Islands, Selina Leem, speaks during the UN Climate Change Conference COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. Credit: Hannah McKay/Pool via AP



Britain's Prince William makes an address during a meeting with Earthshot prize winners and finalists at the Glasgow Science Center on the sidelines of the COP26 U.N. Climate Summit in Glasgow, Scotland, Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2021. The U.N. climate summit in Glasgow gathers leaders from around the world, in Scotland's biggest city, to lay out their vision for addressing the common challenge of global warming. Credit: AP Photo/Alastair Grant, Pool

Helen Mountford, a climate expert at the World Resources Institute, said the agreement "sets a strong floor in terms of the ambition we need globally."

Separately, the United States, Britain, France and Germany announce a plan to provide funds and expertise to help South Africa phase out coal, a major source of greenhouse gas emissions.

South Africa, which gets about 90% of its electricity from coal-fired plants, will receive about \$8.5 billion in loans and grants over five years to roll out more renewable energy.

The announcements were not part of the formal negotiations taking place in Glasgow, but rather a reflection of the efforts by many countries to meet previously agreed targets.

But campaigners say the world's biggest carbon emitters need to do much more. Earth has already warmed 1.1 degrees Celsius (2 degrees Fahrenheit). Current projections based on planned emissions cuts over the next decade are for it to hit 2.7C (4.9F) by the year 2100.

Climate activist Greta Thunberg told a rally outside the high-security climate venue that the talk inside was just "blah blah blah" and would achieve little.

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