

Climate talks convene with US and world falling short of goals

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For the first time since 1995, when the U.N. started holding its annual

climate summits, the United States brought something big to the talks that began Sunday: a series of new laws that could take a big whack at its greenhouse gas emissions. But even that—and the steps taken by other nations—falls short of what is required to prevent catastrophic climate change in the coming years and decades.

"We are in the fight of our lives, and we are losing," U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said Monday at the summit's opening ceremonies. "We are on a highway to [climate](#) hell with our foot still on the accelerator."

An October U.N. report showed the planet under current climate policies will warm 2.8 degrees Celsius by 2100, a scenario climate scientists say would usher in mass desertification, millions of climate refugees, melting ice caps and mass die-offs of plant and animal species.

Held at Sharm el-Sheikh, an Egyptian resort city on the Red Sea, the talks kicked off Sunday following a brutal run of climate-linked disasters, including torrential flooding in Pakistan in the summer, wildfires in Siberia in August, record heat in Europe, drought in the Horn of Africa, and Hurricane Ivan, which ripped through Florida in October.

Bracketing the climate talks are global inflation, a looming home-heating crisis in Europe and the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has led to a wheat shortage and spiking food prices. And while Jair Bolsonaro, who as Brazil's president had overseen a surge of deforestation of the Amazon, lost his reelection campaign last month, a Republican takeover of either the House or the Senate could spell disaster for the Biden administration's climate agenda.

Enactment of the climate, health and tax law, which includes about \$370 billion in clean energy funding, was a "big step forward relative to where

we were eight months ago, even six months ago," said Nat Keohane, president of the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, or C2ES.

Foreign nations and leaders will welcome the newly signed American laws, Keohane said. "But in a sense that's table stakes," he said. "We're supposed to set a target, supposed to make it ambitious. ... There is much more that needs to be done."

Over the last year, global emissions have continued to rise at record pace, creating an atmosphere with more than 420 parts per million of carbon dioxide—more than at any time in human history. A recent independent analysis of 40 indicators of the state of the global climate found none were on track to meet global climate goals and five "headed entirely in the wrong direction."

In Egypt, the U.S. will emphasize how it's implementing the new laws to meet the targets of the 2015 Paris climate agreement, administration officials said.

"This COP, COP27, we view as an implementation COP," John Kerry, President Joe Biden's climate envoy abroad, told reporters, using the shorthand for the annual climate summits.

New steps

The U.S. will announce at the talks a series of new climate steps, Kerry said, including an "increased effort on the global methane pledge, additional funding for adaptation and resilience from President Biden and the U.S."

Following the talks last year in Scotland, when the administration sought to demonstrate it had not abandoned climate action, this summit will focus on bringing the new laws into force, a senior Treasury Department

official said.

"Now it's implementation time," they said. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen became the first Treasury secretary to attend a U.N. climate summit when she went to Glasgow last year.

Beyond Biden, who is scheduled to attend, Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin, D-Md., is leading a delegation of Senate Democrats, including Thomas R. Carper of Delaware, Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts and Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, a Senate aide said.

As the impacts of climate change become more apparent, less developed nations are pushing the world's richest nations and highest emitters to pay for climate adaptation projects.

This general concept, known as "loss and damage" payments, will loom large in Egypt, said Nisha Krishnan, who tracks climate resilience in Africa for the World Resources Institute.

"There's no longer a world where we can ignore what has happened in Pakistan, what has happened in terms of the drought in the Horn of Africa for the fourth year running, floods in Nigeria, the hurricane in the Philippines," Krishnan said.

Following Paris, climate talks have shifted from setting targets to implementing those goals. "It's no longer (just) a climate conversation," Krishnan said. "It has become an economics and finance conversation."

Climate change is disproportionately hitting Africa, which is losing 5% to 15% of its per capita economic growth due to climate effects, according to a September report from the African Development Bank.

Worldwide economic challenges of inflation, fuel costs and food prices

complicate the negotiations, Krishnan said. "We're obviously starting to face some economic headwinds," she said, highlighting heating costs in Europe.

Developed nations have not come through on their pledge, made in 2009, to provide at least \$100 billion annually for countries on the frontlines of climate change, said Kaveh Guilanpour, vice president of international strategies of C2ES.

Wealthy countries also promised last year to double adaptation funding for the world's most vulnerable nations. "Neither of these have been met yet, and that doesn't really create a great atmosphere for the negotiations," Guilanpour said.

Given the goals of the Paris deal that are legally binding under international law, the focus in Egypt must be on paying for climate damages and carrying through climate targets, he said. "We really need to see a focus on delivery of promises and not just target setting," said Guilanpour, a former climate negotiator for the U.K.

He said the Egyptians are expecting roughly 100 heads of state at the talks.

In a letter sent Friday, Senate Democrats pressed Biden to "ensure developing nations receive sufficient funding, including grants, to adapt to and respond to losses and damages caused by climate change."

Human rights

House and Senate Democrats in a separate letter last week urged the president to spotlight Egypt's record of [human rights abuses](#), called for the release of dissidents, and lobbied the White House to prod the host nation for a "full participation of civil society throughout this year's

summit."

Reps. Donald S. Beyer Jr., D-Va., and Tom Malinowski, D-N.J., co-chairs the Egypt Human Rights Caucus, went further, saying in a news release that "Egypt was the wrong choice" to host the talks.

"Its government jails environmental and political activists and treats NGOs as a threat," they said. "We encourage President Biden and Special Envoy Kerry to use this opportunity to raise the issue of human rights and the imprisonment of environmental, political, and other activists directly with President Sisi."

Ryan Finnegan of America Is All In, a climate advocacy network of cities, counties, states, universities, tribes, businesses and nonprofits, said subnational groups and governments will be essential to cut emissions.

"You have to have folks throughout all of society rowing in a similar direction," Finnegan said. Since Paris, there's been an uptick in interest from nonfederal and independent advocacy groups in climate talks, he said. "There's always been a little bit of an inside and outside game underway at COPs."

The climate, health and tax law passed with only Democratic votes is projected to lower U.S. emissions 40% by 2030, down from 2005 levels, modeling experts and economists say, and the laws on computer chips and infrastructure may also help slash emissions.

Erin Mayfield, a Dartmouth College engineering professor, said the climate law could avoid more than 35,000 premature deaths over the next decade, an economic benefit of \$300 billion.

It could also create 1.7 million jobs by 2030 and "spur record-setting growth in wind and solar capacity," Mayfield said.

Sanguine job projections aside, the world is on track to miss goals set in Paris of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and 2 degrees at most, said Tracy Bach, a visiting professor focused on climate negotiations at Washington University in St. Louis.

Countries set what are called "nationally determined targets," or NDCs, under Paris. "All those NDCs, even if they were all achieved at this point, would not keep us well below 2C, let alone on track for 1.5," Bach said.

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