

Frustration as latest talks on global plastic treaty close

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Delegates at the final day of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution meeting in Nairobi on Sunday.

The latest negotiations toward a global plastic treaty concluded late Sunday with disagreement about how the pact should work and

frustration from environment groups over delays and lack of progress.

Negotiators spent a week at the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) headquarters in Nairobi haggling over a draft [treaty](#) to tackle the growing problem of plastic pollution found everywhere from ocean depths to mountaintops to human blood.

It is the third time negotiators have met since 175 nations pledged early last year to fast-track talks in the hope of finalizing a treaty by 2024.

The meeting in Nairobi was supposed to advance the process by fine-tuning the draft treaty and starting discussions about what concrete measures should target pollution from plastic, which is made from fossil fuels.

But the treaty specifics were never really addressed, with a small number of oil-producing nations — particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia — accused of employing stalling tactics seen at previous negotiation rounds to hinder progress.

"Unsurprisingly, certain countries are blocking progress on every term, playing obstruction and procedural maneuvers," Carroll Muffett from the Center for International Environmental Law told AFP.

Lacking leadership

In closed-door meetings, so many new proposals were put forward that the text—instead of being revised and streamlined—ballooned in size over the course of the week, according to observers following the talks.

Graham Forbes from Greenpeace said the meeting had "failed" its objectives and urged governments to take a harder line in future negotiations on nations not acting in good faith.

"A successful treaty is still within reach but it will require a level of leadership and courage from big, more ambitious countries that we simply have not seen yet," he told AFP.

There was anger directed at UNEP, with the civil society alliance group GAIA accusing the hosts of overseeing "an undisciplined and meandering" meeting that allowed a minority to hold proceedings "hostage".

UNEP said "substantial" progress had been made by nearly 2,000 delegates in attendance.

The International Council of Chemical Associations, the main industry group for global petrochemical and plastic companies, said the process had improved an "underwhelming" draft and jostling between governments was critical for treaty building.

"We (now) have a document—a draft text—that is much more inclusive of the range of ideas," spokesman Stewart Harris told AFP.

The plastics meeting comes just before crucial climate talks in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates later this month that are set to be dominated by debate over the future of fossil fuels.

Global demand for plastic has seen production double in 20 years and at current rates, it could triple by 2060 without action, according to the OECD.

Ninety percent of plastic is not recycled, with most dumped in nature or improperly burned.

Environment groups have long argued that without curbs on the manufacturing of new plastic any treaty would be weak.

Behind schedule

Around 60 "high ambition" nations have called for a treaty that eliminates some plastic products through bans and phase outs, and enshrines rules to reduce plastic production and consumption.

But in Nairobi, some nations expressed reluctance to support cuts on plastic production, a concern recognized by the incoming chair of the negotiation committee.

"We are not here to end all plastic, we are here to end [plastic](#) pollution," Ecuador's Luis Vayas Valdivieso told delegates after his election on Sunday.

Divisions also sharpened over whether treaty terms should be legally binding or voluntary.

Eirik Lindebjerg from the World Wide Fund for Nature said despite frustrations the process had not been derailed, and a majority of countries still supported a strong treaty.

"I wouldn't call the meeting a failure. We are behind schedule, but we are not off track," he told AFP.

There are two final rounds of negotiations in 2024: the first in Canada in April, and a second in South Korea in November, with the goal of adopting a treaty by mid-2025.

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