

Pacific islands blast COP26 pledges as meaningless

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Pacific island dancers join a rally to call for climate action held in Sydney during COP26 [File: Dan Himbrechts/EPA]

Sydney, November 27 (RHC)-- The United Nations COP26 Climate Change Conference held in Glasgow this month was billed as the last chance to save the future of life on earth by ensuring global warming did not exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

There were notable pledges by participating nations to roll back the use of coal and fossil fuels, stop deforestation and boost conversion to zero-emission forms of transportation.

But for many Pacific Islanders, the summit failed on the decisive action needed to guarantee the containment of global warming and denied justice to nations that are among the most vulnerable to climate-induced poverty.

“Glasgow missed the 1.5 degrees goal. It was the Pacific’s expectation that this would be firmly and irreversibly secured in Glasgow,” Satyendra Prasad, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Fiji to the United Nations in New York told Al Jazeera. “We are now dependent on large emitters to offer deeper emissions cuts. But the second part of the equation is more important. These countries have fewer and fewer years left in which to achieve the cuts before 1.5 degrees is lost permanently.”

The 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) threshold can only be attained if global carbon emissions are reduced to net zero by 2050, UN climate scientists have said. “To anyone in the world who is still listening to the Pacific, let me remind them that 1.5 is the last possible compromise that the Pacific can offer the world,” Prasad added. “Beyond that, you are asking their leaders to sign away the right to exist as countries on our shared planet. To lose 1.5 is a declaration of war on Pacific Governments, it is a declaration of war on our communities and on our peoples. It is that simple – period.”

In July, three months before the summit opened, Pacific Island leaders attended a preliminary Pacific-UK High Level Climate Dialogue meeting with conference president, Alok Sharma. They demanded that emission reduction targets by nations had to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2025 – in their view, the mid-century deadline is too late – and for developed nations to make good on a 2009 promise to provide \$100 billion per year in funding for climate mitigation and adaptation in more vulnerable countries.

Setting a precedent, parties at the summit confronted the issue of fossil fuels with a group of 190 nations, regions, and organisations agreeing to accelerate the transition away from unabated coal power generation.

Another pact spelled out the commitment by more than 100 nations to halt and reverse forest destruction and land degradation by 2030. Governments and car manufacturers, including Ford, General Motors, Jaguar and Mercedes-Benz, also pledged to make zero-emission vehicles more accessible and affordable. Road transport accounts for 10 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions. Countries, including Denmark, Japan, United Kingdom, United States and New Zealand, also vowed to reduce aviation emissions and invest in the development of low and zero-carbon aircraft.

“We need to thank the large emitters especially for undertaking significant commitments. The combined actions across sectors, from energy, transport, agriculture and shipping are significant. They will shape and drive industry and individuals to do more.... Climate action is good business. I think Glasgow demonstrated that forcefully,” Prasad said.

However, Ashwini Prabha-Leopold, Board Chair of the Pacific Islands Climate Action Network told Al Jazeera that the agreement on phasing down coal use does not go far enough. “After 30 years, governments finally had the guts to talk openly about the problem of fossil fuel dependence at COP26, but failed to encode a bold solution in their final outcomes. Future COPS will have to build on the small steps taken in the Glasgow agreements and go beyond tepid language that ultimately serves fossil fuel interests,” Prabha-Leopold said.

Scientists estimate the collective pledges made in Glasgow would result in an estimated global temperature rise of 2.4 degrees Celsius (4.3 degrees Fahrenheit).

Islanders believe this would be devastating for countries, such as Papua New Guinea (PNG). “We would continue to experience warmer than normal air temperatures as we are seeing at this time and the sea levels are increasing. Our economy, especially the fishing industry might be at risk. Coral bleaching will continue to rise and PNG will see an increase in flooding due to extreme weather,” Kisolet Posanau, Climate Research Officer at PNG’s National Weather Service in Port Moresby, told Al Jazeera.

Much of the anger and frustration expressed by Pacific Islanders derives from the inequity of their predicament. While the Pacific Islands region has contributed only 0.03 percent to global greenhouse gas emissions, they face a daily reality of rising sea levels, increasing sea surges, king tides, and regular destruction wrought by cyclones.

More than half of the Pacific Islands population of about 12 million people live less than one kilometre (.6 miles) from the sea. Extreme climate and weather are affecting people’s access to food and freshwater. And ocean acidification is likely to affect fisheries, a critical industry that islanders depend on for food, income, and national exports.

“PNG’s weather and climate have changed over the past ten, even five years,” Posanau said. “I work with climate data every day and see this trend. Our wet season and dry season don’t fall on the normal transition months any more, and there have also been high cases of dengue fever, malaria, viral infections and even heat rash.”

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