

UN chief says humanity has become a weapon of mass extinction

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Montreal, December 7 (RHC) --UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has slammed multinational corporations for turning the world's ecosystems into "playthings of profit" and warned failure to correct course would lead to catastrophic results. "With our bottomless appetite for unchecked and unequal economic growth, humanity has become a weapon of mass extinction," he said at the ceremonial opening of talks on biodiversity in Montreal on Tuesday.

Nearly 200 countries have gathered for the December 7-19 UN Biodiversity Conference, the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The conference will aim for the adoption of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, a global roadmap for the conservation, protection, restoration and sustainable management of biodiversity and ecosystems for the next decade.

One million species are at risk of extinction, one-third of all land is severely degraded and fertile soil is being lost, while pollution and climate change are accelerating the degradation of the oceans. "We are treating nature like a toilet," Guterres said. "And ultimately, we are committing suicide by proxy," with the effects felt on jobs, hunger, disease and death. "This conference is our chance to stop this orgy of destruction," he added. Species are vanishing at a rate not seen in 10 million years. As much as 40 percent of Earth's land surfaces are considered degraded, according to a 2022 UN Global Land Outlook assessment.

More than 10,000 participants, including government officials, scientists and activists, are attending the summit amid calls by environmentalists and businesses to protect natural resources and halt the loss of species.

Negotiators hope that the two-week UN summit yields a deal that ensures there is more "nature" — animals, plants, and healthy ecosystems — in 2030 than what exists now. But how that progress is pursued and measured will need to be agreed upon by all 196 government signatories of the CBD.

Draft targets for the 10-year framework include a cornerstone pledge to put at least 30 percent of their land and sea areas under conservation by 2030 — a target often referred to as the "30-by-30" goal. Currently, only about 17 percent of the world's land area falls under some sort of protection, while less than 8 percent of the global ocean is protected.

The new goal will rely heavily on the involvement of Indigenous peoples, who steward land that is home to about 80 percent of Earth's remaining biodiversity. Divisions have already emerged on the key issue of financing, with wealthy countries under pressure to funnel more money to developing nations for conservation.

The draft deal is still riddled with bracketed phrases — indicating a lack of agreement, negotiators said. While previous iterations of the agreement had about 900 brackets, that number ballooned up to about 1,400 during the discussion in the days ahead of COP15.

Some of the toughest areas include whether to include efforts to curb climate-warming emissions, whether to impose a deadline for phasing out pesticides and how to ensure poor nations will have the funding needed to restore degraded areas.

Hopes have already been tempered by the absence of world leaders, aside from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Trudeau stressed the need for countries to reach the "30-by-30" goal. He also said Canada would put \$350 million towards international biodiversity finance. Economic losses from ecosystem degradation, meanwhile, are estimated to stand at \$3 trillion annually from 2030. "There are lots of disagreements between governments," Trudeau said. "But if we can't agree as a world on something as fundamental as protecting nature, then nothing else matters."

The UN biodiversity talks, held every two years, have never garnered the same attention as the world's main environmental focus – the annual UN talks on climate change. But there is increasing awareness that protecting nature and controlling climate change go hand in hand.

Healthy ecosystems such as forests and seagrass beds are key to controlling global warming. At the same time, rising global temperatures are increasingly threatening many ecosystems as well as species unable to adapt quickly or to move to cooler climes.

COP15 is currently chaired by China, but it is not hosting the meeting because of the COVID pandemic. China was due to hold the summit in the city of Kunming but postponed the event four times from its original date in 2020 due to COVID before agreeing to hold the talks in Montreal.

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