

Climate Action Summit Highlights: Monday, 23 September 2019

The UN Climate Action Summit, an initiative of UN Secretary-General António Guterres to encourage increased ambition on climate change action, was attended by over 65 heads of state and governments, in addition to leaders of sub-national governments and the private sector. The opening ceremony was followed by thematic sessions, interspersed with general statements from heads of state and government. Thematic sessions were held on: Plans for a Carbon Neutral World; Climate Finance; Powering the Future from Coal to Clean; Unlocking the Potential of Nature in Climate Action; Towards a Resilient Future; Small Island Developing States (SIDS); Live, Work and Move Green; Cutting Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emissions Now with Cooling and Energy Efficiency; Adapting Now: Making People Safer; Least Developed Countries (LDCs); People Centered Action Now; and the Economy Moving from Grey to Green.

Opening Ceremony

In opening remarks, Guterres highlighted the need to reduce emissions by 45% by 2030. He called for increased acceleration in climate financing, including by implementing the commitment by developed countries to mobilize USD 100 billion annually for developing countries by 2020, and replenishment of the Green Climate Fund (GCF).

A dialogue between youth and the Secretary-General followed. Paloma Costa, Brazil, called for all nations to declare a climate emergency. Anurag Saha Roy, India, urged governments to support youth entrepreneurs working on climate solutions. Stressing that “governments are failing us,” Greta Thunberg, Sweden, said “the world is waking up, and change is coming whether you like it or not.” Guterres noted that young people are calling for and implementing climate action. Pope Francis called on humanity to cultivate honesty, responsibility, and courage in response to climate change.

General Statements

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand, highlighted: her country’s Zero Carbon Bill; a ban on new permits for offshore oil and gas exploration; and plans to reduce farming emissions.

President Hilda Heine, Marshall Islands, called on countries to join a pledge to deliver new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) by 2020 and achieve net zero global emissions by 2050.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India, announced shifts in national energy policy worth over USD 50 billion, including increases in renewable energy capacity and in the ratio of biofuel blended in petrol and diesel.

Chancellor Angela Merkel, Germany, said her country aims for climate neutrality by 2050, and noted that EUR 55 billion has been earmarked for investment in low-carbon technology and transformation of the transport and housing sector.

Plans for a Carbon Neutral World

This session focused on announcements of plans to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 or sooner, including through enhancing NDCs by 2020.

President Sebastián Piñera Echeñique, Chile, the host nation for the 25th Conference of Parties (COP 25) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2019, said 30 countries have committed to carbon neutrality by 2030, and over 60 have committed to increasing ambition in their NDCs. He highlighted his country’s efforts to achieve a circular economy.

President Sauli Niinistö, Finland, said the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action assembled by Finland and Chile now has 40 members.

Michael Bloomberg, UN Special Envoy for Climate Action, announced the expansion of Bloomberg Philanthropies’ global coal work to reach the goal of no new coal plants after 2020.

Mayor Valérie Plante, Montreal, Canada, announced plans to reduce the city’s GHG emissions by 55% by 2030, compared to 1990.

Oliver Bäte, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Allianz SE, said the Net Zero Asset Owner Alliance, consisting of 12 large asset owners with USD 2.4 trillion in funds, has committed to fully transition its portfolios to net-zero emissions companies by 2050.

Climate Finance

President Emmanuel Macron, France, announced a doubling of France’s contribution to the GCF to USD 1.7 billion, and called for a trade instrument to address emissions related to imports.

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Qatar, revealed plans to make the 2020 FIFA World Cup the first carbon-neutral tournament in the world, and pledged USD 100 million to support the climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts of SIDS and LDCs.

Prime Minister Andrew Holness, Jamaica, said the delivery mechanisms of climate finance remain fragmented and slow.

Powering the Future from Coal to Clean

This session focused on making the economic and business case for shifting to renewable energy and the health case for phasing out coal.

President Zuzana Čaputová, Slovakia, said her country will be carbon neutral by 2050, and announced EUR 2.5 billion for climate investments by 2030.

Jane Burston, Executive Director, Clean Air Fund, announced a new philanthropic fund to address the “public health emergency” of air pollution, two-thirds of which comes from burning fossil fuels.

Henrik Poulsen, CEO, Ørsted, said the power company will stop using coal altogether by 2022, and will be carbon neutral by 2025.

José Ignacio Sánchez Galán, CEO, Iberdrola, said his company has reduced its emissions to a quarter of those of similar energy companies, and he committed to further halving emissions by 2030 and reducing them to net zero by 2050.

General Statements

President Carlos Andrés Alvarado Quesada, Costa Rica, highlighted measures to ban fossil fuel exploration and exploitation, incentivize electric vehicles, tax fossil fuels and invest the proceeds in nature, and build electric trains.

Vice-President Jusuf Kalla, Indonesia, underscored measures to restore degraded lands and conserve mangroves.

Wang Yi, State Councillor and Special Representative of President Xi Jinping, China, highlighted that since 2005, China’s carbon dioxide emissions intensity has dropped by 45% and the country has contributed a quarter of newly afforested land globally.

Unlocking the Potential of Nature in Climate Action

This session focused on announcements on the scaling up of nature-based solutions in NDCs and long-term, low-GHG emissions development strategies (LEDS) to increase ambition and concrete actions to protect nature, and to better fight climate change.

Prime Minister Imran Khan, Pakistan, highlighted that Pakistan has planted 1.1 billion trees in the past five years and aims to plant 10 billion in the next five years.

Prime Minister Erna Solberg, Norway, noted her country’s commitment to strengthening its NDC, submit a LEDS, and double its contributions to the GCF. Highlighting the potential of oceans-based climate action, she called for making COP 25 a “blue COP.”

President Félix Antoine Tshilombo Tshisekedi, Democratic Republic of Congo, warned that while forests and peatlands capture 30% of GHG emissions, they only receive 1% of available financing.

President Jimmy Morales, Guatemala, described a USD 200 million initiative for reforestation and forest preservation, and encouraged the use of biofilters to clean up rivers, saying they have been used to remove 60% of the floating waste from Guatemalan rivers.

Emmanuel Faber, CEO, Danone, announced the launch of One Planet Business for Biodiversity, a coalition of 20 large food and other agro-based companies that will incorporate nature-based solutions. The coalition will work to restore soil health, create demand for crop variety, and address deforestation.

General Statements

Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Iceland, said her government has doubled its contribution to the GCF. She called for a price on carbon, said smart policies can keep the cost of climate action low, and stressed the need for climate justice.

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, Denmark, said the newly formed government aims for a 70% reduction in emissions by 2030 from 1990 levels, and stressed the need for a just and fair transition.

President Iván Duque Márquez, Colombia, highlighted national actions including electric mobility incentives, corporate income tax discounts for investments in clean energy, and a goal to plant 100 million trees by 2022.

Towards a Resilient Future

This session addressed plans to mainstream climate risk in decision making.

Prime Minister Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, Fiji, outlined national measures including a goal to achieve 100% renewable energy by 2030, and relocating vulnerable communities and infrastructure.

President Muhammadu Buhari, Nigeria, said his country will expand its green bonds, and achieve 30% renewable energy by 2030.

Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the Netherlands, highlighted his country’s goal to reduce emissions by 49% in 2030, and 95% in 2050, compared to 1990. For the EU, he expressed support for an enhanced 2030 emissions reduction target and a 2050 climate-neutrality goal.

Mark Carney, Governor, Bank of England, supported: mandatory disclosure of climate-related risks in line with the guidelines of the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures; improving the ability of capital providers to address climate-related financial risk; and the introduction of transition indices to capture “50 shades of green.”

John Haley, CEO, Wills Towers Watson, said the newly launched Coalition for Climate Resilient Investment, which represents 34 companies and organizations with more than USD 5 trillion in assets, will develop analytical tools to better understand climate risk and plans to make innovative investments.

General Statements

Princess Lalla Hasnaa, Morocco, underlined a national commitment to youth as exemplified by the African Youth Climate Hub set up by the Mohammed VI Foundation for Environmental Protection.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, Portugal, presented policies put in place to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, such as a carbon tax, and highlighted plans to phase out fossil fuels.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore, pledged USD 5 million to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Specialised Meteorological Centre and noted efforts to increase the country’s reliance on solar energy.

Small Island Developing States

This session focused on the vision of SIDS for developing along a resilient and carbon-neutral pathway, with the support of the international community.

Prime Minister Mia Mottley, Barbados, described the “SIDS Package” of climate actions, in which all members of the Alliance of Small Island States have committed to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

President Tommy Esang Remengesau Jr., Palau, described a SIDS sustainable energy package as a blueprint for partnerships, including for leveraging multilateral mechanisms to achieve public-private partnerships.

Prime Minister Allen Michael Chastanet, Saint Lucia, called on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to establish a dedicated climate fund for SIDS.

President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, Maldives, outlined a national programme on Integrating Climate Change Risks into Resilient Island Planning.

Francesco La Camera, Director General, International Renewable Energy Agency, outlined the Climate Investment Platform to support SIDS and other developing countries in implementing their NDCs, and facilitate private sector engagement to accelerate the energy transition.

General Statements

President Lenín Boltaire Moreno Garcés, Ecuador, described national efforts to reduce deforestation and guarantee the rights of nature and of current and future generations. He called for the re-capitalization of the GCF.

Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, Ireland, announced plans to, among other things, take coal off the grid by 2025, increase renewable energy from 30% to 70% in ten years, ringfence revenues from a carbon tax for climate action, and prohibit diesel and petrol vehicles by 2030.

Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Gordeyev, Russian Federation, announced his country's ratification of the Paris Agreement.

Live, Work and Move Green

This session focused on concrete actions to transition to a decarbonized built environment, sustainable mobility systems, and specifically tailored financial and technical support for urban transitions.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey, highlighted a transition to natural gas for household energy needs in his country, and a commitment to increase the share of renewable energy in the energy mix. Reporting on outcomes from the Infrastructure, Cities and Local Action "track," he highlighted commitments to decarbonize the building sector under the Zero Carbon Buildings for All initiative.

President Uhuru Kenyatta, Kenya, noted his country's efforts to shift to renewable energy and a commitment to plant two billion trees by 2022. Reporting on outcomes from the Infrastructure, Cities and Local Action track, he highlighted an initiative on Building the Climate Resilience of the Urban Poor, which aims to build the resilience of 600 million vulnerable people.

Governor Janet Mills, state of Maine, US, announced that her state has pledged to become carbon neutral by 2045.

Mayor Tri Rismaharini, city of Surabaya, Indonesia, outlined actions including protecting urban forests, planting millions of trees, and the launch of a climate-friendly transport initiative.

President Werner Hoyer, European Investment Bank, said the Bank will align all its financing with Paris Agreement goals by 2020 and announced the Leadership for Urban Climate Investment initiative to accelerate climate finance for cities.

General Statements

Prime Minister Charles Michel, Belgium, described several EU initiatives, such as a proposal to spend up to 25% of its budget on climate change.

President Idriss Déby Itno, Chad, said climate change causes an exodus from rural areas and exacerbates terrorism. He underscored the high cost of transitioning to renewable energy, calling on countries to honor their financial commitments.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Greece, outlined plans to close all lignite power plants by 2028, ban single-use plastics by 2021, and convene a high-level meeting in Athens in 2020 to adopt a declaration for the protection of cultural and natural heritage from climate change impacts.

President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, Djibouti, shared his country's plan to achieve 100% renewable energy by 2030.

Cutting GHG Emissions Now with Cooling and Energy Efficiency

This session focused on concrete and transformative actions to deliver climate-friendly and efficient cooling plans and the scaling-up and delivery of energy efficiency in NDCs and LEDS.

President Danny Faure, Seychelles, highlighted a 100% renewable energy goal, energy efficiency measures, the development of a national strategy on electric mobility, and efforts under the Green Cooling Africa Initiative.

Frank Jensen, Lord Mayor, Copenhagen, Denmark, highlighted the need to support cities in exploring innovative urban cooling efforts.

Kate Hampton, CEO, Children Investment Fund Foundation, announced a USD 20 million contribution to the Kigali Cooling Efficiency Program, and highlighted the Cool Coalition partnership of governments, businesses, and civil society.

Eric Rondolat, CEO and Chair, Signify, called on others to join the Three Percent Club of countries and companies committed to achieving 3% annual progress on energy efficiency.

General Statements

President Moon Jae-in, Republic of Korea, pledged to double his country's contributions to the GCF, described a national emissions trading system, and said the country has shut down four coal power plants, with six more to be closed by 2022.

King Mswati III of eSwatini said his country will need USD 150 million to implement its strategic plan on renewable energy, and said it aims to increase energy access to 90% of the population.

Prince Albert II of Monaco committed to contributing to the GCF replenishment and outlined plans for a 50% reduction of emissions by 2030 in the housing sector.

Adapting Now: Making People Safer

This session focused on concrete regional and global actions to better adapt to climate change and prevent and respond to disasters.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh, announced the launch of the multi-stakeholder Risk-Informed Early Action Partnership.

Tuntiak Katan, a representative for indigenous peoples, said indigenous peoples protect 80% of the world's biodiversity and preserving this natural capital would benefit all.

Bill Gates, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, announced support of over USD 790 million for smallholder farmers to adapt to climate change; and pledged USD 310 million over the next ten years for CGIAR to tackle climate change and make food production more productive.

David Malpass, President, World Bank Group, highlighted the Global Risk Financing Facility to help vulnerable countries manage the financial impact of climate change and natural hazard-induced shocks.

General Statements

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, Thailand, said the ASEAN region's 2025 blueprint includes targets to reduce the average fuel consumption of new light-duty vehicles, and to enact fiscal policy measures related to fuel consumption at national levels, while striving for a regional standard.

Prime Minister Xavier Bettel, Luxembourg, announced plans to provide free public transportation in his country by 2020 and to become a leader in climate financing, including by using innovative financing.

Least Developed Countries

This session focused on the vision of LDCs for developing along a resilient and carbon-neutral pathway, with the support of the international community.

President Sahle-Work Zewde, Ethiopia, announced targets under the sustainable energy access track to ensure that no one is left behind in the clean energy transition. She said her country set a world record by planting 350 million trees in 12 hours.

Prime Minister Charlot Salwai, Vanuatu, highlighted that 15% of Vanuatu's 2020 fiscal budget will be allocated to improve climate resilience, and said quantified adaptation efforts will be included in its revised NDC.

Mustapha Bakkoury, President, Masen, announced the launch of a programme, in 2020, for financial and legal support to develop accelerated renewable energy projects, and for sharing capacity-building expertise.

Akinwumi Adesina, President, African Development Bank (AfDB), announced: the AfDB's doubling of climate finance to USD 25 billion by 2025, of which 49% is reserved for adaptation; the launch of a Disaster Risk Financing Facility; and a green baseload facility to shift from financing coal to renewable energy.

Prime Minister Lotay Tshering, Bhutan, said his country is carbon negative, and 72% of the country is under forest cover. He said the LDC group plans to deliver climate-resilient pathways by 2030 and achieve net zero emissions by 2050, and support of USD 450 million is needed to reach these goals.

General Statement

Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, said the European green deal will soon be presented, and many member states have already endorsed a goal of EU carbon neutrality by 2050.

President Julius Maada Bio, Sierra Leone, indicated commitments to planting 2 million trees by 2023 and creating, promoting and facilitating markets for renewable energy technologies.

President Ueli Maurer, Switzerland, said his country is committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

President Gitanas Nausėda, Lithuania, announced a global initiative on sustainable heating.

People Centered Action Now

This session featured announcements on people-focused climate action – jobs, gender, and other social drivers as enablers of greater national and sub-national ambition.

President Pedro Sánchez Pérez-Castejón, Spain, announced contributions of EUR 55 million to the GCF and EUR 2 million to the Adaptation Fund.

Prime Minister Salvador Del Solar, Peru, presented a global initiative on air pollution, under which 41 countries and 71 cities have committed to improve clean air standards.

Sharan Burrow, General Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation, said climate action must be combined with a just transition.

Isabelle Kocher, CEO, Engie, called for an inclusive transition.

Suma Chakrabarti, President, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, said nine multilateral development banks have committed to raise their annual global climate action investment to USD 175 billion by 2025.

General Statement

President János Áder, Hungary, pledged USD 6 million in international climate finance, and noted his country has reduced carbon dioxide emissions by 32% since 1990.

The Economy Moving from Grey to Green

This session featured announcements of concrete and ambitious actions to get to carbon neutrality before 2050.

Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, Sweden, announced a doubling of the country's contribution to the GCF and the launch, with India, of a Leadership Group for Industry Transition to accelerate fossil fuel-free transitions for heavy industry.

Mahendra Singhi, CEO, Dalmia, said his company will be carbon negative by 2040.

Martin Lindqvist, CEO, SSAB, said the first steel mill without carbon dioxide emissions will be operational in 2025.

Jacques Vandermeiren, CEO, Antwerp Port Authority, underscored the crucial role of ports in providing infrastructure to support the transition to zero-carbon shipping.

Søren Toft, Chairman, Maersk, highlighted Maersk's target of carbon neutrality by 2050.

General Statement

President Evo Morales, Plurinational State of Bolivia, outlined national plans regarding forests, access to water, renewable energy, and waste.

A representative of the President of the Republic of the Congo highlighted: his country's goal of reforesting one million hectares by 2025; the Blue Fund for the Congo Basin launched in 2016; and a partnership with France for financing and implementing a REDD+ investment plan.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, Italy, said his country's LEDS will aim at carbon neutrality by 2050, with a commitment to phase out coal-fired power by 2025.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, UK, expressed confidence that the UK can achieve its net-zero by 2050 target, and announced a doubling of UK spending on climate change through the country's official development assistance.

Closing Remarks from the Secretary-General

In closing remarks, Guterres noted key announcements made during the day, including the 77 countries, 10 regions and 100 cities that committed to net zero carbon emissions by 2050. While warning of the work that still lies ahead, he reiterated his call for no new coal plants to be built from 2020.

The Summit ended at 7:13 pm.

In the Corridors

The General Assembly hall was filled with expectation as the Summit began on Monday morning, but by the time Greta Thunberg finished her enraged speech, the mood had decisively changed to one of discomfort. One delegate observed that the very air seemed to leave the room, and "the truth hurts."

The string of commitments to carbon neutrality and to double contributions to the GCF elicited applause. However, one observer expressed concern that the sum total of new contributions is "tragically insufficient" in light of the scale of the fundamental transformation that is needed.

Throughout the day, Greta's words hung in the air. Observers wondered whether any of the day's commitments really counter the "fairy tales of eternal economic growth." As the day drew to a close, some wondered whether the SDG Summit, starting the next day, would hold promise for the transformative changes that many speakers acknowledged to be desperately needed.