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Headline: Four key people to watch at COP28

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The president of the upcoming COP28 climate change Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber speaks during the Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition at ADNEC Exhibition Center October 2, 2023. AFP FILE PHOTO

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DUBAI — King Charles III, Pope Francis and COP28 President Sultan Al Jaber might grab headlines at next week's COP28 in Dubai, but they are not the only people who will play an important role at the crunch UN climate conference.

Negotiators, activists and the leaders of vulnerable small island nations are all key to shaping the November 30 to December 12 talks.

Here are four people to watch:

China's special climate envoy Xie Zhenhua delivers a speech at the COP27 climate conference at the Sharm el-Sheikh International Convention Centre, in Egypt's Red Sea resort city of the same name, on November 8, 2022. AP FILE PHOTO

China's long-standing climate change envoy Xie Zhenhua has represented the world's leading CO2 emitter since 2007, so is a major player at the annual conference. He took part in the negotiations that paved the way for the landmark Paris Agreement in 2015.

Born in Tianjin in 1949, Xie made a career in China's green sector, before spearheading his homeland's negotiators at the climate conferences.

The veteran diplomat has forged strong ties to his US counterpart, John Kerry, despite the complicated relations between the two nations.

"Xie Zhenhua is a role model for future climate diplomats. He is deeply committed to climate action and is willing and able to bridge the gaps between China and the global community," said Li Shuo, at the Asia Society Policy Institute.

Ineza Umuhoza Grace speaks at the Global Citizen NOW Summit at The Glasshouse on April 28, 2023 in New York City. AFP FILE PHOTO

Eco-feminist and founder of the Rwandan nonprofit The Green Protector, Ineza Umuhoza Grace, will be one of the leading voices outside of the official negotiations seeking to influence events.

She is the global coordinator for the "Loss and Damage Youth Coalition" which brings together young people from the global South and North to demand measures to help vulnerable countries

bearing the brunt of climate change fallout.

The coalition will present 10 demands at COP28, including the implementation of the loss and damage fund that was promised during COP27 last year.

Simon Stiell, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) speaks during an interview with AFP at the Africa Climate Summit 2023 at the Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC) in Nairobi on September 6, 2023. AFP FILE PHOTO

Stiell has served as executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change since 2022. He regularly appears alongside COP presidents during the two-week conferences.

He has no direct power over the discussions, but he uses his influential position to push major countries towards stronger action.

"COP28 is our chance to make a dramatic course correction. Let's seize that chance," he recently pleaded on X (previously Twitter).

Stiell hails from the small Caribbean Island of Granada on the frontline of climate change-induced consequences, where he served as the Minister for Climate Resilience and the Environment for five years following a career in tech.

Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley delivers a speech during the opening session of the New Global Financial Pact Summit at the Palais Brongniart in Paris on June 22, 2023. AFP FILE PHOTO

Another Caribbean native, Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley wields a COP audience disproportionate to her country's small size.

This outspoken lawyer by training has led calls for the "absolute transformation" of the global financial system to align with climate priorities.

"Despite its tiny size Barbados has succeeded in making its voice heard on the world stage and influencing the debate on the international financial system, thanks to the determination of its prime minister," said Frederike Roder of the nonprofit Global Citizen.

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"She took advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic and the growing climate emergency to propose concrete solutions. Although she only represents the Barbados citizens, Mottley has spoken on the behalf of many Southern states and their citizens across the world," said Roder.