2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference

The 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference or Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC, more commonly referred to as COP28,[1] is the 28th United Nations Climate Change conference, being held from 30 November until 12 December 2023 at Expo City, Dubai.[2][3] The conference has been held annually since the first UN climate agreement in 1992. The COP conferences are intended for governments to agree on policies to limit global temperature rises and adapt to impacts associated with climate change.[4]  
 In early 2021 the United Arab Emirates offered to host the 2023 event,[5] and in November 2021 the prime minister and vice president of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum announced that the UAE would be hosting the 2023 conference. It was the second time in two years that the conference was held in the Middle East, and the third time it was hosted by a member of OPEC after Qatar in 2012 and Indonesia in 2007.[6]  
 The United Arab Emirates is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, due to its very hot and humid climate. The observed annual average mean surface air temperature in the UAE has risen by 1.27°C (2.29°F) between 1990 to 2022.[7] Without a reduction in emissions, wet-bulb temperatures in the region are expected to cross 35°C (95°F) for a prolonged period of time by the 2070s.[8][9][10] The Red Sea and Persian Gulf are the regions with the highest number of heat-humidity extreme events in the world, and they have exceeded safe wet-bulb temperature thresholds several times.[11] Other impacts felt in the region are dust storms, sea level rise, and drought. According to the Climate & Clean Air Coalition, the UAE is making efforts to reduce emissions in many ways across different sectors of its economy. Measures include promoting organic and hydroponic agriculture, building the Etihad Rail, reducing waste (especially food waste), and promoting a more circular economy.[12]  
 The UAE pledged to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2050; the first Middle Eastern government to make such a pledge.[5] It was the first country in the region to sign the Paris Agreement on 21 September 2016.[13][14] The country has invested $50 billion into clean energy internationally and promised an additional $50 billion by 2030.[15][16] In November 2022, the UAE agreed to partner with the United States to invest another $100 billion in clean energy.[17] On 1 August 2023, the UAE allowed environmental activists to “assemble peacefully” at the summit and vowed to provide them a space to “make their voices heard”, despite its laws that prohibit unauthorized protests.[18]  
 Roughly 2 months before the conference, some called for an increase in international cooperation which they saw as a necessary condition for successful climate action. Fatih Birol, head of the International Energy Agency, expressed hope for significant achievements in the summit but noted: "[the] geopolitical situation, with many nations at loggerheads over the war in Ukraine, and still frosty relations between the US and China, would make for a difficult summit [...] The most important challenge [to limiting temperature rises to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels] is the lack of international cooperation."[19][20] The climate envoy from Bangladesh described the lack of global solidarity as the main obstacle to stopping climate change, emphasizing the need to create a loss and damage fund.[21] Governments have expressed concern that similar to the war in Ukraine, the 2023 Israel–Hamas war may adversely impact negotiations at COP28.[22][23][24][25]  
 At the end of November 2023, a pre-COP meeting of ministers was held. 100 delegations and 70 ministers attended, more than any prior pre-COP meeting. The general director of the COP, Majid al-Suwaidi, insisted the conference would deliver in the domain of loss and damage what was agreed at the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference.[26]  
 Before the conference, Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation called Laudate Deum, calling for brisk action against the climate crisis and condemning climate change denial.[27][28] The Pope planned to attend the conference, which would have marked the first Papal visit to a United Nations Climate Change conference,[29] but had to pull out due to ill health.[30] King Charles III is also expected to participate in the summit.[31] United States President Joe Biden is expected not to attend, with the 2023 Israel–Hamas war and internal US government spending difficulties being cited as possible causes.[32]  
 China's representative declared that China, the United States, and the European Union agreed to cooperate to ensure the success of the conference.[33] At the beginning of November, insiders cautiously expressed hope for a climate agreement between China and the United States ahead of the conference, similar to the agreement of 2014 which paved the way for the Paris Agreement. China published a plan to reduce methane emissions ahead of the conference, but there was expected contention on coal use in China. China has recently characterized coal as essential for its energy security although others say energy security could be improved through upgrades to the energy grid and domestic energy market. [34] Talks between Janet Yellen and He Lifeng yielded a decision to enhance cooperation between the countries on climate related issues and much will be expected from the meeting between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping later in the month at the 2023 APEC summit. According to Kate Logan from the Asia Society Policy Institute, cooperation between the 2 countries, can "set the stage for a successful outcome at the COP28".[35]  
 On 15 November, the United States and China announced an agreement based on negotiations between climate envoys John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua to "pursue efforts to triple renewable energy globally by 2030". The agreement included a commitment to addressing greenhouse gases, including warming agents other than carbon dioxide, but was criticized for not including a commitment from China to phase out coal-fired power plants. The agreement was praised as a "significant outcome" by COP28 president-designate Sultan Al Jaber.[36][37]  
 In September 2023, in advance of the opening of COP28, the United Nations published the first two-year assessment of global progress in slowing down climate change, called the "global stocktake".[38] This type of overview was established during COP26 in Glasgow and is scheduled to be repeated every five years.[39][40] The report says that a phase-out of unabated fossil fuels is needed. Previously the United Nations avoided making similar statements.[41] Among the 17 key findings of the report are:[42]  
 Sultan Al Jaber was named President-Designate of COP28 UAE in January 2023.[43] He is the CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC); he also serves as chairman and a founder of the renewable energy company Masdar, leads the UAE's climate envoy, and serves as minister for industry and advanced technology.[44] The move was criticized in an open letter from over 130 US lawmakers and Members of the European Parliament, who were calling for the removal of Al Jaber as the president-designate of COP28. The letter expressed concerns over how the private sector polluters were exercising "undue influence" over the climate summit’s process.[45][46] In May 2023, US Senator Ed Markey separately criticized the decision to hold COP28 in the UAE.[47] Other individuals, such as US climate envoy John Kerry, expressed their support for Al Jaber's appointment.[48]  
 Al Jaber's presidency of the COP28 climate change conference contradicted his company's decision to expand fossil fuel production in ADNOC Drilling company. The human rights organization Amnesty International raised concerns, stating, "Sultan al-Jaber cannot be an honest broker for climate talks when the company he leads is planning to cause more climate damage."[49]  
 In January 2023, Dubai Cares became the Education partner for COP28. It had already participated in COP27 held in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt.[50]  
 In April 2023, the UAE organizers of COP28 told the speakers at the climate and health conference to not protest or "criticise corporations" in the Emirates. The warning cited the Gulf state's laws, under which the panel members were warned: "Do not criticise Islam, UAE government, corporations or individuals". Climate activists raised concerns about how the UAE will host COP28 without freedom of speech.[51]  
The UAE invited the president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad to COP28. According to Human Rights Watch the UAE was assisting Assad to improve his image and HRW stated it was outrageous that COP28 was being used to reintroduce Assad into the international community.[52]  
 In June 2023, governments gathered in Bonn to prepare for COP28. HRW highlighted that the UAE doesn't allow freedom of expression and had been aggressively silencing critics. The organization said the governments in Bonn should use the opportunity to push the Emirati authorities to ease the "grip on civic space and uphold rights". It said the UN and other governments must demand the UAE to end the persecution of rights defenders like Ahmed Mansoor. However, HRW also expressed concerns that there's a risk that the COP28 participants will stay silent fearing retaliation.[53]  
 On 7 June 2023, a report based on technical analysis by The Guardian revealed that Sultan Al Jaber's ADNOC was able to read the emails to and from the COP28 climate submit office. ADNOC was also consulted over how to reply to media inquiries by the consultancy firm, Gulstan Advisory. The report also stated that the COP28 office shared its email servers with ADNOC. The COP28 office shifted to a different server after the The Guardian's inquiry.[54]  
 In August 2023, John Kerry urged the oil and gas industry leaders to bring strategies at COP28 to cut their scope 1 (directly caused) and scope 2 (indirectly caused) emissions by 2030. He also asked them to initiate capital allocation commitments for renewable energy during the same timeline. On the other hand, climate experts and campaigners were raising concerns that the COP28 event would become an "oil COP", as it was taking place in a petrostate. Central to this criticism was the inclusion of the oil and gas industry in a crucial role in the discussions to combat climate change.[55]  
 Pope Francis was scheduled to attend the COP28 for 3 days however was forced to cancel his trip after contracting influenza developing lung inflammation.[56]  
 On the starting day of the summit on 30 November 2023, a "loss and damage" fund to compensate poor states for the effects of climate change was agreed on. The fund aims to distribute funds to poor states harmed by climate change and is to be administered by the World Bank. Initial promises were made by the host (UAE) to donate $100 million to the fund, and by the United Kingdom ($75 million), United States ($24.5 million), Japan ($10 million) and Germany ($100 million).[57][58]  
 In his opening speech of the conference, Charles III expressed alarm at rising levels of pollution, saying that the world was "dreadfully far off track" its climate targets.[59] The British monarch warned that "we are carrying out a vast, frightening experiment of changing every ecological condition, all at once, at a pace that far outstrips nature’s ability to cope".[60]  
 COP28 is the first COP to discuss the impact of climate change on public health.[61] In a letter addressed to Sultan Al Jaber, the medical community said a complete phase-out of fossil fuels was the only decisive way to deliver health for all.[62] The World Health Organization called on ministers of health to raise their voices for health as the driving force behind climate action, leading by example with climate-friendly healthcare systems, and advocating for climate finance that safeguards human well-being.[63] It has been estimated that climate change is set to cost up to $580 billion by 2030 in climate related damages to vulnerable countries.[64]  
 Previously, experts such as Edmond Fernandes have urged UNFCCC to mainstream[clarification needed] public health in all meetings and policies, as human health remains integral to sustainable climate futures.[65]  
 Ahead of the COP28 summit between political leaders of the world, the Muslim Council of Elders in partnership with the COP28 Presidency, the UN Environment Programme, and the Catholic Church, and under the patronage of the UAE’s President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan organized a Global Faith Leaders Summit convening 28 faith leaders to address climate change.[66]  
 Prior to the conference, the UAE attempted to whitewash its international reputation. The country hired PR and lobbying agencies, including Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, Gulstan Advisory, and FleishmanHillard, to promote itself as the host of COP28.[67] The appointment of the UAE as host of the conference was controversial due to the country's track record on fossil fuel production. The President of COP28 is Sultan Al Jaber, who as head of ADNOC has overseen a substantial expansion of gas and oil production at the same time that fossil fuel industries are under pressure to reduce output in order to mitigate climate change.[68][69] In May 2015, COP28 President Sultan Al Jaber was accused of attempting to greenwash his image by paying users to clean his Wikipedia page. A Wikipedia user revealed that they were paid by ADNOC, while another was paid by Masdar to control the narrative on Wikipedia.[70] Another report revealed that fake user accounts were being used to run promotional campaigns and defend controversies around COP28 on social media platforms. Hundreds of such pseudo-accounts were operating on Twitter and Medium. The campaign aimed at promoting and greenwashing COP28, while also defending criticism against the conference and Al Jaber.[71] Leading into the summit, users on social media noted a large number of fake social media accounts being used to defend UAE's presidency of the climate summit. The social media accounts were tracked by Marc Owen Jones of Hamad Bin Khalifa University.[72]  
 Campaigning journalist Amy Westervelt has been critical of lead‑up efforts by the UN organizers to improve the transparency of COP28 by requiring industry lobbyists to identify and argued this measure is entirely inadequate to control influence.[73]  
 During the past decade, the UAE has spent more than $1 million on direct climate-focused advocacy and paid millions more to advisory firms like Gulstan Advisory and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld and think tanks helping to polish its green credentials. No other host nation has invested as much time and money to shape its image ahead of the annual climate negotiations.[74]  
 A report based on leaked documents by The Guardian revealed that the UAE prepared an all-inclusive list mentioning the "touchy and sensitive issues", ranging from the UAE's climate issues to human rights violations, such as the war in Yemen and human trafficking. The document included "strategic messages" approved by the Emirati government, which were to be used as a reply to the media. The document highlighted that the country would defend ADNOC's failure to disclose its emissions since 2016 by saying that "Adnoc is currently conducting necessary studies". Besides, the document also mentioned that questions on Sultan Al Jaber's presidency will be answered with, "Dr. Sultan's full circle career [in energy, climate, and diplomacy] gives him the expertise needed to constructively engage, disrupt, and unite the very sectors needed to achieve meaningful action."[75]  
 The UAE hired a US-based PR firm, First International Resources, to "counteract all negative press and media reports" around the Gulf state as a COP28 host. The agreement followed the negative criticism of the UAE's decision to assign Sultan Al Jaber as the COP28 president. On 4 August 2023, the company registered under FARA to represent Masdar. According to the filings, the PR firm was supposed to seek to "reinforce attitudes among decision-makers in Washington DC, and across Europe regarding the strategic value of the UAE in the global fight to address climate change". The UAE was to pay First International Resources a monthly retainer fee of $100,000. Fossil Free Media founder and director Jamie Henn said such an amount is not paid to a PR firm "when you're confident about your public image". He said that much is spent "when you want to spin the public to believe the impossible", such as the claim that the UAE and Al Jaber had been "really committed to transitioning away from fossil fuels".[76]  
 In August 2023, The Guardian revealed that for nearly a decade, the UAE failed to report its methane emissions to the UN. Meanwhile, Sultan Al Jaber's ADNOC set a much higher methane leak target than the level it claimed to have already reached. Cutting methane emissions is believed to be a fast and low-cost method to slow the temperature rise because methane causes almost a quarter of global heating.[77] In November of the same year, a report by the Centre for Research on Energy and in[clarification needed] hosting the summit. The UAE's Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan commissioned a survey of over 20,000 from 20 countries, which was used by the officials to discuss the public attitude towards the Arab nation. The major concerns were all about human rights. One of the participants, Sconaid McGeachin said COPs have become a platform for activism. She was heard saying, "We need to preserve the reputation of the UAE...and try to minimize those attacks as much as possible". A spokesperson for COP28, Vincent Hughes called the leaked recording "unverified".[78]  
 The UAE has been adapting its conference facility, the prior site for Expo 2020, to host the COP28 climate conference. FairSquare, a UK-based human rights group, released a report based on testimonies and photographs, stating that the migrant workers were being exposed to dangerously hot weather and humidity to prepare for the climate summit. According to the rights group, in September 2023, a dozen migrant workers from Asia and Africa were working outdoors in temperatures hitting 42°C despite a midday ban. COP28 denied the allegations and claimed that no evidence of the midday ban’s breach was found. A worksite supervisor said most of the work is done at night, but some has to be done whenever possible. A Cop28 spokesperson said contractors were required to have worker heat safety plans and weather stations that monitor the Thermal Work Limit, as well as taking into account heat and humidity metrics including wet and dry bulb temperature and wind speed.[79]  
 Ahead of COP28, Amnesty International raised concerns that the UAE might continue to use digital surveillance to spy on human rights defenders and civil society members in the UAE, including the COP28 participants. Rebecca White, Campaigner at Amnesty International’s Disrupting Surveillance Team, said that the UAE has a record of using digital surveillance to “crush dissents and stifle freedom of expression”. She said the UAE’s pledge to offer a platform for activists’ voices can’t be achieved unless human rights are respected. Amnesty suggested that the Emirati authorities shouldn’t engage in “unlawful electronic surveillance of conference participants as well as all Emirati nationals and residents”. It said the COP28 attendees should be allowed to download “privacy-respecting international communications applications” in the UAE, as it would ensure a safe and encrypted means of communication.[80][81]  
 On 7 November 2023, an AFP investigation revealed in multiple leaked documents that McKinsey was using its position as the primary advisor to COP28 hosts, the United Arab Emirates, to push the interest of its oil and gas clients (ExxonMobil and Aramco). McKinsey has been accused of putting its own interests ahead of the climate by sources involved in preparatory meetings for COP28. McKinsey's energy scenario for the COP28 presidency would allow for continued investment in fossil fuels, which would undermine the goals of the Paris Agreement; an "energy transition narrative" recommends oil use to be reduced by only 50% by 2050, and that trillions of dollars should continue to be invested in high-emission assets each year to at least 2050.[82]  
 On 27 November 2023, According to the Centre for Climate Reporting and BBC, leaked documents revealed the UAE intended to use COP28 as a platform to discuss fossil fuel deals with 15 countries, including a deal with China to "jointly evaluate international LNG opportunities" in Mozambique, Canada and Australia. The report stated that fossil fuel talks between ADNOC and 15 countries were planned, in addition to talks between Masdar and 20 countries including the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and others ahead of the summit.[83][84][85] Al Jaber forcefully denied reports that UAE wanted to seek oil deals in summit, calling the allegations false and an attempt to undermine work of the COP28 presidency. Al Jaber stated that the UAE does not need the COP presidency to go and establish better deals or commercial relationships. Immediately after the remarks, a faked news release was sent to the Associated Press stating that Al Jaber has agreed to resign. COP28 organizers with the UAE delegation later confirmed it was false and Al Jaber would continue in his role.[86][87][88]