

Activist Greta Thunberg gives blistering U.N. speech on climate change

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Environmental activist Greta Thunberg, of Sweden, addresses the Climate Action Summit in the United Nations General Assembly, at U.N. headquarters, Monday, September 23, 2019. Photo by: Jason DeCrow/AP Photo

UNITED NATIONS — Dozens of world leaders met at the United Nations Climate Action Summit Monday, September, 23. They talked about their efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. However, they were upstaged by youth activists who are angry that officials are not doing enough to prevent climate change.

Climate change refers to the heating up of the Earth's climate. It is also sometimes called global warming. Global warming is connected to burning fossil fuels, like oil, wood or gas. Greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide are then released into the air. This causes the climate to become warmer.

"Empty Words," Says Youth Activist

Sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg gave an emotional speech at the summit. Thunberg is a climate activist from Sweden. She criticized leaders for their "empty words."

"We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you?" Thunberg said. "If you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you."

Some smaller countries pledged to boost their pollution reduction targets. Those targets were agreed to under the 2015 Paris Agreement. That agreement commits countries to holding down the increase in global temperature. President Barack Obama committed the United States to the agreement. However, in 2017 President Donald Trump announced plans to withdraw.

None of the major economies most responsible for global warming delivered new plans on Monday.

Laurence Tubiana is a French economist. She was a key negotiator of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. She heads the European Climate Foundation. She saw some progress at Monday's summit. There were a growing number of countries and companies pledging to move toward a carbon-free economy.

However, political leaders' response to youth protesters "is so weak that I am distressed," she said. "Their response is 'we are listening,' but I think they are tone deaf."

The gathering clearly fell short of the outpouring of action U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had sought.

"Young people, rightly fearful for their futures, have called this moment a line in the sand, the moment for leaders to unite behind the science," said Christiana Figueres. She is the former executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. "We saw some progress today," she said, but she added that most governments still aren't doing enough.

No Concrete Commitments

Guterres had asked leaders "not to come with fancy speeches, but with concrete commitments." He had offered speaking time only to countries taking strong actions.

"It is my obligation, our obligation to do everything to stop the climate crisis before it stops us," Guterres said.

The lack of participation by the United States was seen as a major setback. The U.S. is the world's largest economy. It is responsible for spewing the most planet-warming emissions over time.

Trump made a brief, unexpected appearance at the summit. Asked later why he had stopped by, he said, "I believe in clean air and clean water. Very simple."

The U.N.'s World Meteorological Organization released a new report. They released it one day before the summit. It found that 2015 to 2019 is on track to be the hottest such period on record. Temperatures are already 1.1 degrees Celsius higher than in pre-industrial times, with no peak in emissions in sight.

The Paris Agreement aims to keep global warming "well below" 2 degrees Celsius. And within 1.5 degrees if possible. However, dramatically stronger actions are necessary. Otherwise, the planet will warm even faster.

After her remarks Thunberg, with 15 other young people, filed a formal U.N. complaint against five of the world's most powerful countries. The complaint said that the nations' failure to tackle climate change is a violation of their rights as children.

More youth-led protests were planned for Friday, September 27.