

'You are failing us'

Greta Thunberg condemns world leaders in emotional speech at U.N. Climate Summit

Greta Thunberg has excoriated world leaders for their "betrayal" of young people through their inertia over the climate crisis at a United Nations summit that failed to deliver ambitious new commitments to address dangerous global heating.

In a stinging speech on Monday (Sept. 23), the teenage Swedish climate activist told governments that "you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is. You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal."

Days after millions of young people joined protests worldwide to demand emergency action on climate change, leaders gathered for the annual United Nations general assembly aiming to inject fresh momentum into efforts

to curb carbon emissions.

But Thunberg predicted the summit would not deliver any new plans in line with the radical cuts in greenhouse gas emissions that scientists say are

About this story:
It originally appeared in The Guardian. It is republished here as part of the CN&R's partnership with Covering Climate Now, a global collaboration of more than 250 news outlets to strengthen coverage of the climate story.

needed to avoid catastrophic breakdown.

"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words," a visibly emotional Thunberg said.

"The eyes of all future generations are upon you. ... We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line."

As the summit spooled through about 60 speeches from national representatives, it became clear that Thunberg's forecast was prescient. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told delegates that "the time for talking is over" in announcing a plan to ramp up renewable energy but announced no phase-out of coal—a key goal set by António Guterres, the U.N. secretary general who convened the summit.

Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, did

set out the end of coal-mining in her country but only by 2038—a lengthy timeframe that disappointed environmentalists.

Meanwhile, China declined to put forward any new measures to tackle the climate crisis.

Emmanuel Macron, the French president, called for the European Union to deepen its emissions cuts and said that France would not make trade deals with countries not signed up for the landmark Paris climate agreement. "We cannot allow our youth to strike every Friday without action," Macron said.

Despite Guterres' efforts, the summit was somewhat overshadowed by its absentees—most notably the U.S., and Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, whose representatives were reportedly not selected to make a presentation there because of Brazil's failure to outline plans to strengthen its efforts to counter climate change.

Donald Trump did visit the U.N. on Monday but only briefly dipped into the climate summit to see Modi's speech before attending a meeting that he had called on religious freedom. As he arrived at the U.N., Trump crossed paths with Thunberg, who fixed the president with a hard stare.

The summit was designed to accelerate countries' ambition to address the climate crisis amid increasingly urgent warnings by scientists. A new U.N. analysis has found that commitments to cut planet-warming gases must be at least tripled and increased by up to fivefold if the world is to meet the goals of the 2015 Paris agreement of holding the temperature rise to at least 2 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era.

The world is currently on track to warm by as much as 3.4 degrees by the end of the century, the U.N. warned, a situation that would escalate disastrous heatwaves, flooding, droughts and societal unrest. Major coral reefs and many other species face extinction.

"There's a big dissonance between every leader saying to Greta 'we hear you' and the commitments they are putting on to the table,"

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said Isabel Cavelier, a former climate negotiator for Colombia who is now senior adviser at the Mission 2020 climate group. "China said absolutely nothing new, India mentioned commitments made in the past, the U.S., Canada and Australia aren't here."

There were a few signs of progress. A group of nearly 90 large companies promised to reach net zero emissions by 2050, while a handful of countries said they will be winding down coal use. But it became apparent that most of the ambition was coming from developing countries, rather than the major polluters.

Trump has vowed to pull the U.S. out of the Paris agreement, while other major powers are wary of making further commitments ahead of key U.N. climate talks in Glasgow next year.

"Other countries must follow our lead," said Hilda Heine, president of the Marshall Islands, a country situated on coral atolls in the Pacific that is extremely vulnerable to sea level rise. "Falling short will represent the greatest failure humanity has ever seen. The summit must be the moment we choose survival over selfishness."

But delegates at the summit warned that

City Council candidate Rich Ober speaks to hundreds at the Chico City Plaza Friday (Sept. 20). He pledged to support Green New Deal legislation. It was all part of a global climate strike in advance of the U.N. Climate Summit Monday (Sept. 23).

PHOTO BY CHARLES FINLAY

the international effort to stave off dangerous global heating was being undermined by a wave of nationalism. "If you look at the U.S. and Brazil, it's a result of populist politics that is turning its back on the climate," said Cavelier. "That needs to be made explicit and isolated from the world."

Thunberg, who arrived in the U.S. last month on a solar-powered yacht, has directly castigated Congress and leaders at the U.N., as well as spearhead the largest ever climate protest last week.

On Monday she joined 14 other children to lodge a formal complaint under the U.N. convention on the rights of the child.

Thunberg said that world leaders were endangering children by ignoring climate breakdown. "They promised to protect the rights of the child and they have not done this," she said at a media conference. "The message is that we have had enough."

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