COP31 climate summit that could not say 'fossil fuels' ends with no deal

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PERSPECTIVE

After a record 44 hours of overtime, the UN climate talks in Antalya ended on Sunday night without any high-level decision document at all for the first time since the 2000 COP6 summit in The Hague.

A last-ditch effort to bridge the divide between petrostates that had insisted on removing all references to fossil fuels from the initial decision draft that had been tabled earlier last week, and other nations keen to see a clear reference to the leading cause of global warming was rejected by the European Union, the United Kingdom, Panama, the Marshall Islands, Norway and small island states including Tuvalu.

Countries were enraged that the compromise proposed by the co-presidencies Turkey and Australia did not even refer clearly to the landmark agreement reached at COP28 in Dubai on "transition away from fossil fuels", making only a vague reference to the "United Arab Emirates (UAE) Consensus".

Speaking for the EU presidency, Ireland's Climate Minister Darragh O'Brien told the plenary: "We will not accept a COP that greenwashes fossil fuels."

Conceding defeat at the closing plenary on Sunday, COP31 President Murat Kurum, Turkey's environment minister, said, "I understand that there is no agreement on this text," and then declared that the proposed Antalya Pact and its cover decision had not been adopted.

He ruled out another attempt at compromise, and blamed "some" unnamed countries for failing "to demonstrate the level of commitment and flexibility required".

UN Secretary-General António Guterres said he was "deeply disappointed," warning that every delay makes the task harder and more costly, with the overshoot of the 1.5°C warming target set in the Paris Agreement in 2015 now a looming reality.

"Science tells us an overshoot above that level is now inevitable," Guterres warned in a statement, adding that ultimately, fossil fuels "must go the way of the dinosaurs".

COP31 also became the longest UN climate conference ever, overtaking COP25 in Madrid in 2019. COP6 in The Hague failed to adopt any declaration, while COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009 "took note" of that year's cover decision, without formally adopting it — also failing to fulfil the high hopes for any real breakthrough on climate action. That breakthrough moment finally came six years later in 2015 with the Paris Agreement.

Unresolved items from COP31 will now carry over automatically, under rule 16 of the UNFCCC rules of procedure, to COP32 in Addis Ababa in November 2027.



The "very disappointed" President of COP31 Negotiations Chris Bowen sits on his chair at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP31) in Antalya, Turkey, on November 22, 2026.
MURAD SEZER/REUTERS

Delegates react with disappointment

"We have been let down on all sides," the Marshall Islands representative told the room, while Vanuatu objected forcefully to the silence on fossil fuels, the leading cause of warming and sea level rise that is threatening the very existence of many Pacific island nations.

The UK's lead negotiator, Kate Hughes, called the text "a lowest common denominator," while Norway said it took the world backwards from earlier agreements.

Juan Carlos Navarro, Panama's minister of environment, said on Friday said that the COP had been "hijacked by petroleum," and reminded the hall that the world was heading for 4°C before Paris, but it is on course to reach 2.8°C today.

The third and final failed text, issued early Sunday morning, had attempted to bridge the gap between petrostates and 'high ambition' countries by "recalling the United Arab Emirates Consensus in its entirety across mitigation, adaptation and means of implementation" in its second paragraph.

But the oblique reference was seen as too little, too late, by its critics, while a group of Saudi-led states as well as Russia, said they could not accept any wording on fossil fuels at all, even if based on past agreements.

Saudi Arabia and other leading fossil fuel producers had argued for a text that emphasized carbon capture and storage strategies to halt runaway warming — solutions that critics say are expensive and unproven at scale.

Australia's Chris Bowen, the president of negotiations, called the result "very disappointing" but pointed to the more than 90 countries that signed up to a commitment to undertake faster electrification of their energy systems as a positive outcome.

Speaking to Health Policy Watch, a senior official in Papua New Guinea's Ministry of Environment said his delegation did not expect such low levels of consensus. "We would have at least agreed to the [Friday] version."

For the Pacific, the stakes are immediate. "Every piece of coal extracted is a threat to my country's future," Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine had told leaders earlier.

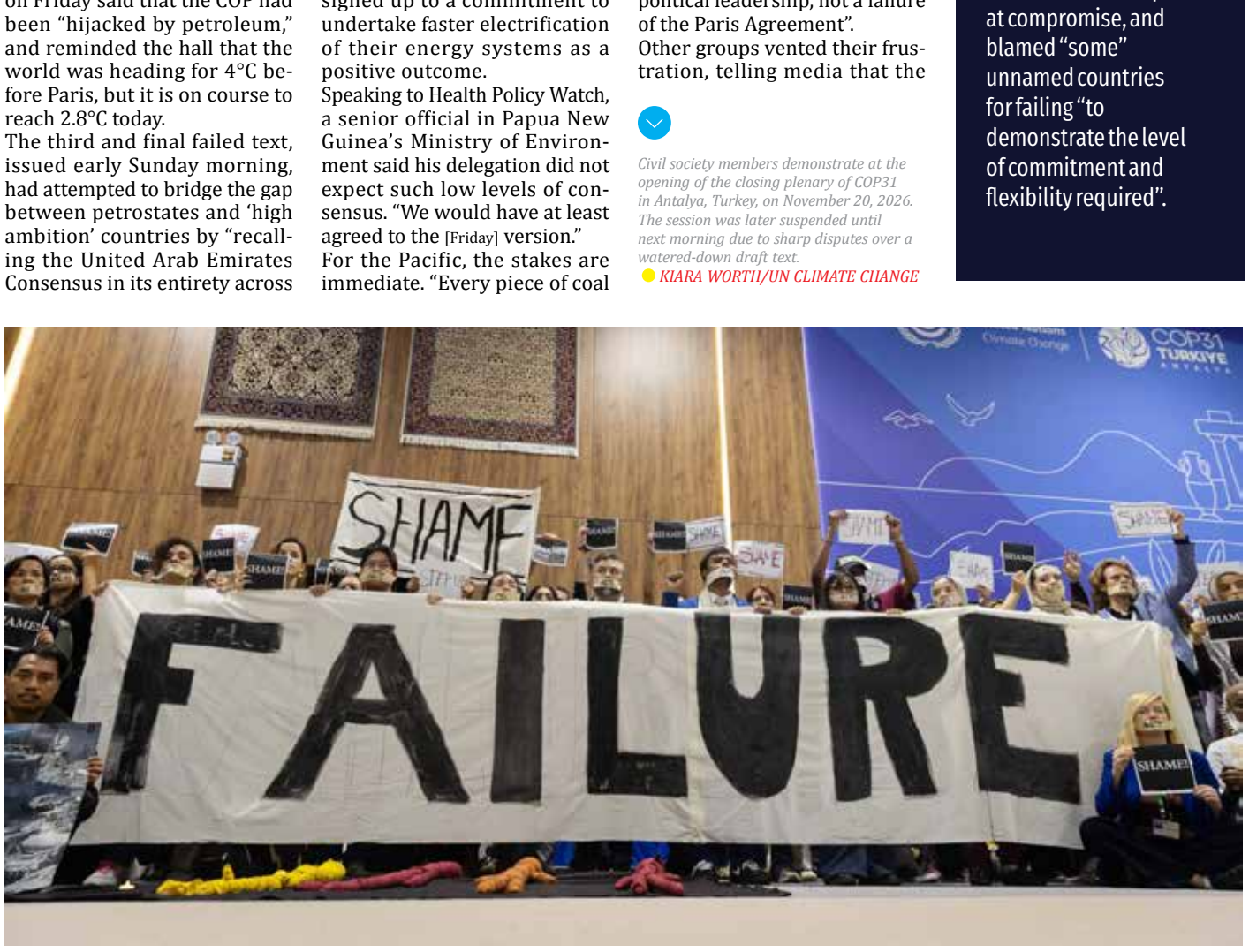
Solomon Islands Prime Minister Matthew Cooper Wale said climate impacts already cost his country about 5% of GDP a year.

Civil society: 'A failure of political leadership'

Civil society organizations were quick to denounce the summit's failure. "This has been the worst COP ever," lamented Mohamed Adow of Power Shift Africa, a Nairobi-based pan-African climate and energy think tank supporting the continent's energy transition and climate adaptation.

The World Resources Institute echoed these sentiments, blaming the results on "a failure of political leadership, not a failure of the Paris Agreement".

Other groups vented their frustration, telling media that the conference yielded nothing that protects people — and is even a license to keep polluting.



Civil society members demonstrate at the opening of the closing plenary of COP31 in Antalya, Turkey, on November 20, 2026. The session was later suspended until next morning due to sharp disputes over a watered-down draft text.
KIARA WORTH/UN CLIMATE CHANGE

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Fossil fuel language disintegrates

The first draft of the decision text, released on November 16 by the COP Presidency, jointly held by Australia and Turkey, called for "the immediate transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems".

But by November 19, after objections from oil producers, multiple references to fossil fuels as a cause of climate change and the need to transition away had disappeared. Instead, language morphed into an "irreversible global transition towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilience".

The final text did not mention fossil fuels at all, and it referred only obliquely to the agreement in Dubai as "recalling the United Arab Emirates Consensus in its entirety, across mitigation, adaptation and means of implementation".

It offered a goal to raise electricity to 35% of final energy use by 2035, carbon capture at "gigatonne scale" and a call to triple adaptation finance with no dollar figure, after a $120 billion target was dropped. Its health paragraph named no diseases and ignored air pollution.

Panama breaks the silence

No country pushed harder than Panama, whose forests absorb more carbon than it emits. In a statement to the COP presidencies, Navarro wrote: "While we listen to endless oratory, the planet is being destroyed." Panama demanded a cap on global oil production at current levels and an end to rules that let one country block agreement.

What the science says

The evidence before delegates left little room for doubt. Global temperature from January to September 2026 was about 1.47°C above pre-industrial levels, and 2015–2026 is set to be the warmest 12 years on record. Human-induced warming will pass 1.5°C in about four years.

Fossil fuels produced about 88% of CO2 emissions over the past decade, and only 150 billion tonnes can still be emitted for 1.5°C, less than four years at current rates, according to the Carbon Brief. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) says national pledges point to 2.6°C and current policies to 2.8°C, and that limiting the peak to 1.7–1.8°C needs emissions cuts of 18% by 2030 and 45% by 2035.

Climate toll on health

The toll is already measured in lives. Heat was linked to a record 710,000 deaths in 2023, more than 70% of them caused by climate change, according to the Lancet Countdown, while countries spent a net $808 billion on fossil fuel subsidies in 2024.

"No health system can be made resilient to an endlessly warming world," UN climate chief Simon Stiell warned health ministers on the conference's opening day.