

# Ex-Maldives president to tell Cop26: do not compromise on 1.5C

**Mohamed Nasheed says the island state is already harmed by rising sea levels caused by climate change**



The former president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, in 2018. He says his country is already losing land and people to rising seas. Photograph: Dinuka Liyanawatte/Reuters

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Five months after narrowly surviving a terrorist bomb attack, the former president of the Maldives **Mohamed Nasheed** will arrive at the Cop26 summit with a defiant message: no compromise on 1.5C.

That level of global heating is the most ambitious target on the table at Glasgow. It will require a global mobilisation of resources at a scale not seen outside wartime and at least a halving of fossil fuel emissions and tree burning by the end of this decade.

Many oil exporting nations are reluctant to move this quickly, but Nasheed says small island states cannot accept anything less because they are already losing land and people to rising seas.

“I think 1.5C must be asked for again and restated and never left. Anything above 1.5C and the **Maldives** will not be there. We cannot sign a suicide pact,” he told the Guardian.

Small island states such as the Maldives are often seen as the conscience of the Cop process because they are most at risk of climate chaos and push hardest for deep emissions cuts.

But Nasheed said it would be a mistake for people in other parts of the world to think they were safer. “This is not a distant problem for little coloured people in the Indian Ocean, it is all of our problem,” he said. “The whole thing is framed as if it is just these tiny, sad islands losing land and people. But no, we are losing people everywhere. Usually you hear about flood deaths in Asia. Now we are getting the same news in Europe. If you don’t listen to us, listen to your own people, who are dying in front of your eyes.”

Nasheed was almost killed in very different circumstances this year. A bomb attack on his home in May left him critically injured. He needed 16 hours of surgery and was then transferred to Germany for further treatment. No organisation has claimed responsibility, but police have arrested several Islamic State-linked religious extremists.

“I was on the brink of death. I feel there must be a reason why I survived,” he said. “One of the outcomes will hopefully be that I can work harder to advocate in favour of measures against climate change. I must try to work harder and impress the gravity of issue on everyone else.”

Now serving as the speaker of parliament, Nasheed said he had been shocked at the latest report from the Maldives environment committee, which said weather disaster alerts had increased more than fourfold over the past 20 years and more people were being swept out to sea due to storm surges and rough weather. In addition, coastlines are being eroded and more acidic water is destroying coral reef systems and the fisheries that depend on them.

Nasheed said one entire island had been lost in the Baa Atoll, which is a Unesco biosphere. “We are losing ground. We are losing people. We are losing our livelihood. We are losing our culture,” he said. “This is happening now. It is upon us.”

Nasheed is among the most outspoken climate advocates on Earth. He has often suffered for his belief in democracy and opposition to destructive modes of development, which are all the more remarkable in a politically turbulent nation that has often been ruled by dictators. He has spent six years in jail where he was tortured and thrown into solitary confinement for months at a time. He has been similarly brave and outspoken on global heating. The veteran climate activist Bill McKibben has described him as one of only a handful of true world leaders in the fight to save the planet.

Whenever he is not in jail, he said, he has attended Cop conferences. This has convinced him of the need for structural reform of the UN’s climate change framework. “We cannot go on and on talking while the planet is burning or we will lose credibility as politicians and the UN will lose credibility as an institution. It should be able to deliver solutions,” he said. “Now, because of the need for unanimity, we have a situation where if two countries agree on greater ambition but a third country says no, then the two countries reduce their targets to those of third country. We end up with the lowest common denominator.”

Top of his wishlist for Cop is for countries to align their climate plans with 1.5C. That is a long way off. Current commitments are putting the world on track for a calamitous 2.7C, according to the United Nations. Nasheed says he is frustrated by some leaders, such as the Australian prime minister, **Scott Morrison**, who describe 1.5C as a very tall order because of the possible impact on jobs. “Listening to these people sometimes sounds like madness. For God’s sake, if you want to protect jobs and a way of life, then you need climate action.”

He is frustrated by the world’s biggest emitter, China. “They still think it is their right to poison the planet because Europeans have done it in the past. This is a mad idea, as if they are saying ‘the west has brought us to the brink and now we have arrived to push everyone over the edge’. Two wrongs don’t make a right, especially now there is new technology as an alternative to fossil fuels.” But he says a younger group of civil servants in China appear to hold more progressive views than the old guard.

Nasheed hopes rich nations fulfil their promise of \$100bn a year in climate finance starting from 2020, but said cash should not be a substitute for emissions-cutting action.

“I hope they don’t say we will give you more money if you accept 2C and we can keep rubbishing the planet. You can build a big wall and sit back and say isn’t this a beautiful thing.”

He said it would be up to the UK, as the host government, to push for an ambitious agenda that supports the most vulnerable nations. “Sometimes the UK seems to think that just because they are the presidency they can’t take a side. But no, they need to take our side to start the game. This should be about safety and survival. I think they should open the Cop by saying that.”