

# COP26 climate talks off to an ominous start after weak G20 leaders' meeting

By [Angela Dewan](#), CNN International Climate Editor

Updated 0701 GMT (1501 HKT) November 1, 2021 **(CNN)** It was in the city of Glasgow that Scottish engineer James Watt improved the workings of the steam engine and, unwittingly, kicked off the Industrial Revolution. Never could he have imagined that [humans would burn so much coal, oil and gas](#) over the next two centuries that they would imperil the very climate that has allowed for their existence.

More than [120 leaders will speak Monday in the very same city](#) to begin the COP26 climate talks, where they will set the tone for two weeks of negotiations that can either end with a plan to rapidly decarbonize the planet, or make watery statements to delay what the science shows is needed, possibly pushing it off until it's too late. Climate leaders and experts are calling it the world's last best chance to address the climate crisis.



G20 agrees on key climate goals around global warming limits and coal financing, but lacks firm commitments

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose government is hosting the talks, will warn Monday that humanity has run down the clock on climate change.

"It's one minute to midnight, and we need to act now," he will say in an opening speech, according to remarks sent to journalists.

"We have to move from talk and debate and discussion to concerted, real-world action on coal, cars, cash and trees. Not more hopes and targets and aspirations, valuable though they are, but clear commitments and concrete timetables for change."

The G20 leaders' meeting that ended in Rome on Sunday suggests that leaders are finally listening to the science, but they still lack the political unity to make the ambitious decisions required to meet the moment.

COP26 convenes about 25,000 people for one of the biggest international events since the pandemic began, and it comes after a year of extreme weather that claimed hundreds of lives in unexpected places that caught even climate scientists off guard.

The [latest UN climate science report published in August](#) made clear what needs to happen: Limit global warming to as close to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures as possible to avert worsening impacts of the climate crisis. To do that, the world must halve emissions over the next decade and, by mid-century, reach net zero -- where greenhouse gas emissions are no greater than the amount removed from the atmosphere.

All of this language was in the G20 leaders' communiqué, including an acknowledgment that to meet net zero by mid-century, many member nations will need to lift their emissions-reductions pledges, known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), over this decade.



G20 leaders perform the traditional coin toss in front of the Trevi Fountain at the G20 summit in Rome on Sunday.

But their failure to put an end date on the use of coal -- the single biggest contributor to climate change -- and to get all countries to firmly commit to net zero by 2050 (as opposed to 2060, as China, Russia and Saudi Arabia have pledged) shows that the countries that use and produce fossil fuels still have a huge amount of sway in global deals on climate.

Indeed, China's long-awaited new emissions pledge submitted last week was just a fraction higher than its previous one. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Sunday it wouldn't be strong-armed into net zero by 2050. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison showed no interest in consigning coal to history. India has made no net-zero pledge and, as European lawmaker Bas Eickhout told CNN, it was one of a handful of nations against putting a date on phasing out coal.

Michael Mann, a leading scientist at Pennsylvania State University, said it is promising that leaders have acknowledged they need to do more on emissions this decade, but what is important is making sure all big

emitters have plans that are consistent with keeping warming below 1.5 degrees.

"And also a closing of the 'implementation gap' -- that is to say, the gap between what heads of state have nominally committed to, and what they're actually doing," Mann said.

Mann warned that COP26 must not be a summit for delay tactics and said he still had hope that countries could agree to a phaseout of coal at the talks, even if the G20 leaders failed to agree on that point.

"The rather conservative International Energy Agency itself has said there can be no new fossil fuel infrastructure if we are to avert dangerous warming. And the G7 nations committed to phasing out coal and ending support for new coal projects earlier this summer," Mann said.

"We need to see similar commitments from the G20 countries, including an accelerated schedule for phasing out coal."

The G20 statement did commit to an end to coal financing abroad by the end of this year. Chinese President Xi Jinping at the UN General Assembly in September announced an end to Chinese financing of international coal, taking the biggest global financier of coal projects out of the mix.

Helen Mountford, vice president of climate and economics at the World Resources Institute, said the agreement and current emissions pledges are not ambitious enough to avoid the most dangerous levels of warming and many were unlikely to actually get countries on track for their own net-zero plans.

"To keep the 1.5°C goal within reach, countries need to set 2030 climate targets that chart a realistic pathway to deliver these net-zero commitments," she said in a statement.

"Currently, a number of G20 countries are not on a credible trajectory to reach their net-zero goals, including Australia, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Brazil and Turkey."

## 'This isn't nearly enough'

UN Secretary-General António Guterres said Sunday that he was leaving Rome "with my hopes unfulfilled — but at least they are not buried." He was hopeful that Glasgow could still "keep the goal of 1.5 degrees alive." His comments reflect the mood of many at COP26. If the G20 couldn't put an end date on coal and make a firm net-zero commitment, there is a sense that getting the whole world on board with those key issues simply won't happen.



Flooding destroyed his home four times in three years. This is the reality of climate change for India's poor

There is also an issue of trust. The developed world promised more than a decade ago it would transfer \$100 billion a year to the Global South to help it transition to low-carbon economies and to adapt to the new world of the climate crisis.

That target was not met last year, and a report from the COP26 presidency published last week showed it wouldn't be met until 2023, with the current pledges in hand.

Mohamed Nasheed, Maldives' former President who leads the Climate Vulnerable Forum, lamented the lack of action in the G20's statement, particularly on the failure to phase out coal. Maldives is a frontline nation in the climate crisis and risks being submerged by sea level rise by the end of the century.

"This is a welcome start," Nasheed said in a statement. "But it won't stop the climate from heating more than 1.5 degrees and devastating large parts of the world, including the Maldives. And so, clearly, this isn't nearly enough."

Net zero, the phaseout of coal and delivering on climate finance will still be a priority for negotiators. Other areas that could prove successful are an agreement on ending and reversing deforestation by 2030 and movement around speeding up the transition to electric vehicles globally. Tom Burke, co-founder of climate think tank E3G, was more optimistic, saying the G20 statement showed a change in thinking among leaders around the urgency of the climate crisis.

- "The big win is this shift in the focus from 2050 to 2030. I think that's an important big win," he told CNN.

"It sends it off to a better start than we had been expecting. The political agreement achieved at the G20 will create political impetus as leaders meet to start the COP."