



NEWS ROUNDUP

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UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Stiell and COP31 President-Designate Minister Kurum address the media at the COP31 press conference in Istanbul

UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Simon Stiell, Türkiye's Minister of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change and COP31 President-Designate Murat Kurum, together with representatives of current and upcoming UN climate conference presidencies, met with national and international media in Istanbul on 12 February during a press conference marking preparations for the 31st United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31), to be held in Antalya, Türkiye, in November 2026.

INFORMATION OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT DIVISION

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The United States is urging governments to pressure Vanuatu to withdraw a United Nations draft resolution supporting a landmark International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that countries have a legal obligation to act on climate change.

A US State Department cable seen by Al Jazeera on Saturday says that the Trump administration “strongly objects” to the proposed resolution being circulated by the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu in support of last year’s ruling by the ICJ – the UN’s top court.

The Associated Press news agency, which also reported on the cable, said that it was circulated to all US embassies and consulates this week, shortly after Vanuatu announced it was putting forward the draft UN resolution for consideration.

“We are strongly urging Vanuatu to immediately withdraw its draft resolution and cease attempting to wield the Court’s Advisory Opinion as a basis for creating an avenue to pursue any misguided claims of international legal obligations,” a copy of the cable seen by Al Jazeera states.

The ICJ’s 15 judges considered tens of thousands of pages of written submissions and two weeks of oral arguments during the court’s biggest-ever case, before delivering their verdict last year that states have a legal obligation to act on the “existential threat” of climate change.

The ICJ case took place after Vanuatu won the support of 132 countries in the UN General Assembly, which can request opinions from The Hague-based court.

It also came as the Trump administration has sought to undo US action on climate change, both at home and at the UN.

The US cable claims that Vanuatu’s proposed UN resolution in support of the ICJ opinion was based on “speculative climate models to fabricate purported legal obligations that seek to assign blame and encourage baseless claims”.

Louis Charbonneau, Human Rights Watch’s director at the UN, urged support for Vanuatu’s draft resolution on Friday, saying “governments should live up to their obligation” to protect human rights around the world by protecting the environment.

“Responsible governments shouldn’t allow themselves to be bullied by those that reject the global scientific consensus and continue to support reliance on harmful fossil fuels,” he said.

Vanuatu’s UN Ambassador Odo Tevi, who said his country wants a vote on the resolution by the end of March, has stressed that it would ensure that the clarity in the ICJ ruling “strengthens global climate action and multilateral cooperation”.

An article in Vanuatu’s Daily Post newspaper said that the draft resolution has been endorsed by countries including Barbados, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Jamaica, Kenya, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, the Netherlands, Palau, the Philippines, Singapore and Sierra Leone.

Many of these countries are already experiencing the worsening effects of climate change, including increasingly severe storms.

Trump, who has promised to “drill, baby drill” for oil in his second term, has withdrawn the US from UN climate bodies, including the UN’s top climate change treaty body, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Trump has also threatened to impose sanctions on diplomats who voted for a levy on polluting shipping fuels at the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

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Thousands of seabirds were killed off a globally significant stretch of coastline for wildlife in Pembrokeshire, while salvage crews fought for almost a week to lift the stricken tanker off the rocks and tow her to safety.

Described as "a wake up call" that led to changes in public attitude towards the environment, to this day there is anger and debate over how the disaster could have happened.

Experts warn climate change increases the risk of major pollution events in future on busier and more hazardous seas.

"It's all coming back to me 30 years later," said retired BBC reporter Hefin Wyn, looking out to sea at St Anne's Head, a remote spot at the entrance to Milford Haven waterway, one of the busiest ports in the UK.

He recalled "the humming of the tanker" against the lashing wind and rain and then the "heart-breaking" sight of "thick, treacle-like oil" on the sea.

"One could see the birds landing [on the water]... but they couldn't fly away," he said.

"It was a wake-up call - by now we are far more aware of the need to look after the environment than we were at the time."

It was "the single worst incident I've ever seen", said conservationist and TV presenter Iolo Williams, who worked at the time for the RSPB in Wales.

The oil "got into [the pores of] your skin, it got into your hair... and everybody went around with these bright red eyes", he told a new BBC documentary marking the 30th anniversary.

About 7,000 oil-coated birds were picked up along the coast but "the amount killed would have been at least double that because a lot of them would have sunk offshore," he said.

In rockpools, starfish, limpets and other wildlife were smothered - while Pembrokeshire's fishing industry was brought to a standstill for more than 18 months.

The disaster happened in what is the UK's only coastal national park, with 35 Sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs), a marine nature reserve and islands home to internationally significant seabird populations.

What happened when the Sea Empress ran aground?

The 274m (900ft) long, Liberian-registered tanker Sea Empress was on its way to an oil refinery when it hit rocks at the entrance to Milford Haven waterway at 20:07 on 15 February 1996.

The initial response focused on trying to bring another vessel alongside to offload the Sea Empress' cargo of crude oil.

But gale force winds led to the crew and tugboats having to evacuate and the ship was left to ride out the storm for several hours.

Eyewitnesses described the tanker "swinging around like a compass" as waves crashed over the abandoned ship and black plumes of oil spurted out into the sea.

There were repeated attempts in the days that followed to refloat the vessel.

It was finally towed to a jetty on 21 February, ending six days of dramatic scenes which had made headlines around the world.

More than 70,000 tonnes - or 32 Olympic-sized swimming pools worth - of oil had spilled into the sea, affecting an estimated 200km (124 miles) of coastline.

"It was such a shock to the local community," said Gordon James, then director of Friends of the Earth in Wales.

"I remember going down to Tenby and seeing the beautiful North Beach covered in black and there were people there in tears.

"We set up a legal team and we interviewed a lot of people... and the evidence was damning.

"The tugboat men and the marine pilots, they'd issued warnings that safety was being compromised [at the port], there were cutbacks and they were saying more or less it's a disaster waiting to happen."

An inexperienced pilot had been tasked with taking the tanker into Milford Haven and "then we learnt that the radar [at the port] hadn't been working properly for months".

Milford Haven Port Authority was eventually fined £4m, which at the time was the biggest penalty ever issued for a pollution case in Britain.

It was later reduced on appeal to £750,000 to enable the port to make changes to improve safety.

James still feels angry at what he sees as mistakes made during the response to the incident.

He insists the tanker should not have been held in place before the weather turned.

Local pilots and tugboat crews had said they could take the vessel further out to sea or to a jetty to offload the oil but "were ignored", he claimed.

"The storm came in and they lost control."

'Risk of explosion'

Joe Small sees things differently.

He was senior operations manager for the UK's Marine Pollution Control Unit and one of the first people to step on board the Sea Empress after it ran aground.

It became apparent upon inspecting the ship that oil had moved internally into tanks not designed to hold it, presenting "a huge safety issue" and "risk of explosion".

That limited their options, he said, adding that they wanted to make sure the ship was safe before bringing it into a populated area such as Milford Haven.

The salvage operation was "a huge technical challenge" and the fact it was managed within a week was "pretty good going", he claimed.

Tom Sawyer, the Port of Milford Haven's chief executive, called the Sea Empress disaster "a defining moment", saying it had "exposed shortcomings in our industry and caused profound harm to a coastline whose natural beauty and biodiversity we all treasure".

The port had strengthened pilot training and invested in "world-leading navigational technology" as a result, he said.

The disaster led to major changes in how the UK prepares for and responds to maritime incidents, while the shipping industry worldwide "accelerated the adoption of double-hull tankers, mandatory emergency towing points and improved compensation frameworks for environmental damage," Sawyer said.

Could a major oil spill happen again?

"We're constantly looking for ways to improve, better prepare and make things safer," said Joe Small.

Fiercer and more frequent storms brought by climate change was a major challenge - as are busier and more hazardous seas, he warned.

The loss of oil refining capacity in the UK meant a greater need to import refined products like petrol, which comes in on smaller tankers.

"We're now having four or five vessels to carry the same volume [as the Sea Empress]," he said.

"More ships, worse weather - no matter how safe our operations are, things go wrong".

Globally tankers were facing "a resurgence in piracy and other attacks", while a newer phenomenon of so-called "dark fleets - vessels engaged in sanction busting activities" brought further problems.

'The real price of oil'

The Sea Empress disaster could have been much worse.

The time of year it happened meant many key migratory birds had not arrived back to Pembrokeshire's cliffs and islands - and the wind direction blew some of the oil away from the coast.

A massive effort by the community to clean up the beaches was seen as a huge success, allowing the county to recover far more quickly than had been feared.

First Minister Eluned Morgan, then a member of the European Parliament for mid and west Wales, revealed she still had a pair of wellington boots "with Sea Empress oil on them" after helping out.

It showed "how important it is that we treat our seas with respect", she told S4C.

"One of the long-term things that changed was people's attitude," said Nick Ainger, the area's MP at the time.

"Those images they saw - that's the real price of oil. And I think it was the beginning of this substantial change in public attitude towards the environment: how precious it was, and how easily it can be damaged if we're not sensible and caring about it."

"I think about it at every anniversary," added Iolo Williams. "Thirty years on it's important to tell the story so we learn from our mistakes."

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The simulation showed that in today's warmer world, there was a 21% increase in the rainfall rate over a critical six-hour period, and a 56% increase in the area with rainfall above 180 millimeters, compared to conditions in pre-industrial times. Record-high temperatures in the Mediterranean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean during the summer of 2024 increased the amount of water vapor in the atmosphere, adding to the intensity of the storm and changing atmospheric dynamics, all of which lead to heavier and more widespread rainfall, the paper concluded.

The floods in Valencia show that climate-change-induced weather shocks initially thought to be years away are already happening today, the researchers concluded. Some places experienced over ten times more rain in a few hours than they'd normally see in a month, leading to the collapse of roads, bridges and flood barriers.

The disaster highlights the vulnerability of the Mediterranean region, and in particular of the Western Mediterranean, to extreme rainfall, the report's authors said as they called on authorities to accelerate efforts to adapt infrastructure to climate change.

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1. **32 Fossil Fuel Companies Responsible for Half of Global CO2 Emissions in 2024: Report**
32 companies, mostly state-owned, generated half of all planet-warming carbon dioxide emissions in 2024, according to a new analysis. The number is down from 36 five years earlier.

State-controlled companies were responsible for 57% of global fossil CO2 emissions. CO2, a byproduct of burning fossil fuels, biomass, land-use changes, and industrial processes such as cement production, is the principal human-made greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, responsible for about three-quarters of planet-warming emissions.

The database also shows that 17 of the top-20 emitters are controlled by governments that opposed a roadmap to phase out fossil fuels at COP30 last November: Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Iraq, Qatar, and India. The roadmap, supported by a coalition of over 80 countries, ultimately failed to materialize.

The remaining three emitters in the top-20 were UK-based Shell and US-based Chevron and ExxonMobil.

2. **Governments, Green Groups Welcome Historic High Seas Treaty With Celebration, Calls To Action**
The UN High Seas Treaty, the world's first treaty to protect and conserve marine biodiversity in international waters adopted in 2022, entered into force last Saturday.

Formally known as the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, or BBNJ Agreement, the treaty is centered around the creation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) on the high seas to preserve marine biodiversity. The text, two decades in the making, is essential to achieving a global goal to protect 30% of the world's oceans, also known as the "30 by 30" target. Currently, only 1% of the high seas are protected, leaving marine life vulnerable.

For the first time, this legally binding agreement establishes a framework to protect biodiversity in international waters, which cover roughly two-thirds of the ocean. "Protecting our planet hinges on binding protections of international waters – without them, global 30×30 targets slip beyond reach," said Jennifer Morris, CEO of The Nature Conservancy.

However, while many environmental organizations around the world celebrated the occasion, some called for measures that will make the treaty's promises into reality.

3. **UN Report Finds Harmful Investments Outpace Money for Nature 30 to 1**
Investments in projects deemed harmful for nature far outpaced the money invested in nature-based solutions, according to a new analysis.

The report, released today by the UN Environment Programme, looks at global financial data on the imbalance, and explores ways to address the gap in nature based financing. In 2023, the latest year for

which data are available, more than \$7.3 trillion was invested in “nature-negative finance flows” – in other words, projects that directly damage nature.

By contrast, nature-based financing is on the rise but still amounted only to \$220 billion. Nature-based solutions encompass biodiversity and landscape protection, but can also include broader areas such as food systems, utilities, construction, infrastructure, extractives, chemicals, and other “real economy” sectors.

4. Early January Australian Heatwave Made 5 Times More Likely By Human-Caused Climate Change, Analysis Finds

Human-caused climate change made the intense heatwave that hit parts of Australia earlier this month five times more likely, an analysis has concluded.

The country just recorded its most severe heatwave since 2019, when extreme weather conditions fueled what have become known as the Australian Black Summer fires. Maximum temperatures across southeastern Australia were consistently above 40C between January 7-9, topping 44.4C in Melbourne on January 9.

A team of 15 researchers with the World Weather Attribution group analyzed weather data and ran computer model simulations to compare today’s climate, which has warmed 1.3C since the late 1800s, with the past. They concluded that climate change made this month’s heatwave hotter, adding about 1.6C to the temperatures recorded.

This is despite the heatwave happening against the backdrop of La Niña, a recurring weather pattern typically associated with mild temperatures across the region. Study author Ben Clarke called this finding “striking”.

5. Media Shied Away From Climate Coverage in 2025 Despite Increased Reader Interest

The drop occurred despite increasing reader interest in the topic, while greenhouse gas emissions and atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations continued to hit new historic highs.

According to a year-end analysis by the Media and Climate Change Observatory (MeCCO), climate-related issues, events, and developments in 2025 garnered less frequent coverage around the world, down 14% in 2025 compared to the previous year 2024, and 38% lower than the highest year of coverage in 2021. In fact, last year’s coverage ranked just 10th in the past 22 years of tracking global coverage of climate change or global warming.

A separate analysis, by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, confirmed a previously identified trend of “climate perception inertia” – a stagnation in public views, attitudes, and engagement with climate information over time. The report found that the use of climate news and information is in decline in France, Germany, Japan, the UK, and the US, but stable in Brazil, India, and Pakistan. However, the reduction in use of climate news is not for lack of consumer interest. According to the report, “Interest in climate news and information remains high and stable in most countries, suggesting that declines in climate news use are partly driven by reduced supply (especially on TV).”

This finding of continued interest is consistent with what editorial boards observe. Lyndsey Layton, Climate Editor of US-based media The New York Times, told Earth.Org in an email that the Times’ readers “care deeply about the social and environmental impacts of climate change, and the underlying policies and potential solutions.”

UNITED NATION

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UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Stiell and COP31 President-Designate Minister Kurum address the media at the COP31 press conference in Istanbul

UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Simon Stiell, Türkiye's Minister of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change and COP31 President-Designate Murat Kurum, together with representatives of current and upcoming UN climate conference presidencies, met with national and international media in Istanbul on 12 February during a press conference marking preparations for the 31st United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31), to be held in Antalya, Türkiye, in November 2026.

The press engagement took place after a series of strategic discussions involving the COP31 Presidency, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat, and representatives of current and previous COP presidencies. Journalists from Türkiye and international media outlets participated in the briefing.

"Climate action can deliver stability in an unstable world"

Addressing the press, UN Climate Change Executive Secretary Simon Stiell highlighted the importance of strengthened international cooperation during what he described as a period of global instability. "But climate action can deliver stability in an unstable world," he said. "In the face of the current chaos, we can, and must, drive forward a new era of international climate cooperation."

Stiell underlined the need to move into a new "era of implementation" in climate action, focused on delivering concrete outcomes through partnerships, finance and accelerated action across economies and societies. He noted that COP31 would take place at a pivotal moment for climate cooperation, emphasizing that climate action can contribute to energy security, economic resilience and long-term stability. He also referenced Türkiye's efforts in areas such as renewable energy expansion and zero-waste initiatives, and stressed the importance of maintaining momentum toward implementation of the Paris Agreement and outcomes from recent COP meetings.

Türkiye's Minister of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change and COP31 President-Designate Murat Kurum said that preparations for COP31 were advancing with a results-oriented approach. Emphasizing cooperation with partners, he stated that "to make COP31 successful, Türkiye and Australia will work with an approach based on consultation and cooperation."

Kurum noted "we do not see COP31 only as a conference, and no one should." He added that Türkiye's approach to the process is guided by the principles of "Dialogue, not a single voice; Consensus, not division; Action, not stagnation," and indicated that a strong and well-structured action agenda would be announced in March. He also stressed that the COP31 Presidency aims to follow an inclusive and impartial approach that encourages participation and ensures that all voices are heard, leaving no one behind.

Australia's Minister for Climate Change and Energy and COP31 President of Negotiations, Chris Bowen, joined the press conference through a video message from Canberra. He underlined the importance of collaboration among COP presidencies and partners, noting that Australia, Türkiye and Pacific partners were working together to ensure that negotiations and implementation advance hand in hand. He described the partnership as "a unique and innovative model" that reflects confidence in multilateral

cooperation and said COP31 should serve as a bridge between developed and developing countries during a decisive decade for climate action.

Bowen also emphasized that while progress has been made since the Paris Agreement, including reductions in projected global warming levels, much more work remains to protect climate-vulnerable countries and accelerate implementation. “No one nation can tackle climate change alone,” he said, stressing the need for shared learning and collective action.

COP30 President André Corrêa do Lago, who was in Istanbul for the technical meetings, also attended the press conference. He said that the delegation had received information on the venues planned for Antalya, noting that the COP site looks very promising and that Antalya is expected to provide an excellent setting for the conference.

Speakers emphasized the significance of maintaining multilateral cooperation in addressing climate change and the importance of ensuring that implementation efforts are supported by investment, finance and broad participation from governments, the private sector and civil society.

COP31 is scheduled to take place in Antalya from 9 to 20 November 2026, bringing together governments, international organizations, businesses and civil society to advance global climate action and implementation of commitments under the Paris Agreement.

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