

Climate talks postponed due to pandemic but action must continue

Sustainable, climate-resilient recovery should be considered as nations roll out stimulus measures



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For The Straits Times

On Tuesday, the United Kingdom presented a proposal to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) with new dates for the annual UN climate change conference.

Originally scheduled to be held in Glasgow in November, the conference, called COP26, was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The UK will be holding COP26 from Nov 1 to 12 next year instead.

The new dates are a result of intensive consultations with parties and other stakeholders, taking into account the international events calendar, the time needed for preparation of work to deliver on mandates set out under the Paris Agreement, and the organisation of an ambitious and inclusive COP.

African colleagues hosting COP27 have also been engaged closely, as the postponement will affect the timing of COP27 and push it to 2022.

The UK Cabinet Office's COP26 Unit said in a letter to UN member states that "given the uneven spread of Covid-19, this date would present the lowest risk of further postponement".

The letter also included a road map containing details of how the UK COP26 presidency, in partnership with Italy, plans to ensure that momentum for climate action and ambition will continue despite putting the pause on climate negotiations this year.

In a podcast recorded by Green Alliance, Ms Camilla Born, deputy strategy director from the UK Cabinet Office's COP26 Unit, highlighted that the climate has not gone on lockdown, and emphasised the importance of following the proof of science to inform the decisions ahead.



A 2016 photo showing a floating solar photo-voltaic cell test-bed in Tengeh Reservoir in Tuas. Singapore has pledged to peak emissions at 65 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent around 2030.
ST FILE PHOTO

ENHANCING AMBITION

This year marks the five-year point at which countries are to step up their climate ambitions under the Paris Agreement.

Pledges, known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), are to be recommunicated or updated every five years.

A decision accompanying the landmark agreement noted that NDCs are to be communicated to the UNFCCC "at least nine to 12 months in advance of the relevant COP".

This built-in ambiguity, coupled with the postponement of COP26 and countries' prioritisation of Covid-19 responses, could result in NDC submissions being delayed until next year.

Delays will affect the global stocktake starting in 2023, where collective climate ambition will be assessed. To date, just 10 countries have submitted new NDCs – the Marshall Islands, Suriname, Norway, Moldova, Japan, Singapore, Chile, New Zealand, Rwanda and Andorra.

Of these, four submitted second, more ambitious NDCs, while the remainder submitted updates to their first NDC. The UK has said it plans to set a new NDC "well ahead" of COP26.

Singapore submitted an update to its first NDC on March 31, pledging to peak emissions at 65 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO_{2e}) around 2030.

It also submitted a long-term low emissions development strategy to

halve the emissions from its 2030 peak from 65MtCO_{2e} to 33MtCO_{2e} by 2050, with a view to achieving net-zero emissions as soon as viable in the second half of the century.

The UK, as host of COP26, will be expected to submit a new NDC as an independent party to the Paris Agreement. According to analysis by the UK think-tank Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, the UK is expected to go beyond its existing 57 per cent cut enshrined in its national legislation – the Climate Change Act – and to be compatible with its new net-zero target for 2050.

Greater ambition could, however, be hampered by the UK having to leave the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme at the end of this year when the Brexit "transition period" ends.

In 2015, the United States pledged to cut its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 26 per cent of its 2005 levels by 2025. The postponement of COP26 is an opportunity for the US to clarify its climate policy stance.

On Nov 4, the US will no longer be a party to the landmark agreement, a day after the US presidential election. If US President Donald Trump is re-elected, the stance is unlikely to change.

Democratic Party candidate and former vice-president Joe Biden has said that if elected, he will not only recommit the US to the Paris Agreement, but will also lead an effort to get every major country to

ramp up the ambition of their domestic climate targets.

His plan is to put the US on track to achieve "100 per cent clean energy and net-zero emissions by 2050".

OUTSTANDING ISSUES

A major concern for COP26 planners is the outstanding issues from past COPs. The past two conferences – Katowice COP24 and Madrid COP25 – had failed to get to consensus on Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which means the development of a new global carbon market will have to wait until next year.

With this additional time, countries should try to get a head start on the transition of the international carbon market from the Kyoto Protocol regime to the Paris Agreement one.

Delays in the conclusion of outstanding issues mean that countries could have less time to adjust the domestic planning and review processes to comply with the new rules under the Paris Agreement.

A GREEN RECOVERY

The UK COP26 presidency plans to use key high-level meetings in the months ahead to accelerate climate action, and to make progress on issues in the UNFCCC negotiations.

The UK also plans to use key finance meetings, including the UN financing for development meeting and World Bank and International Monetary Fund annual meetings, to drive climate action.

This is not surprising, given that the COP26 president-designate is the UK's Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Alok Sharma.

The Bank of England had in late February launched a COP26 Private Finance Agenda to help private finance support the global economy transition to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions. The objective is that every professional financial decision will need to take climate change into account.

The bank noted that the right framework for reporting risk management and returns will embed these considerations and help finance a whole economy transition.

To achieve the target of reaching net-zero emissions, every company, bank, insurer and investor internationally will need to adjust their business models for a low-carbon world.

The Covid-19 crisis is changing the geopolitical and national conditions within which climate diplomacy operates and the pandemic is showing the world how hard it is to decarbonise. However, instead of focusing solely on disruption and delays, there is now an opportunity for countries to lay foundations for a sustainable and climate-resilient recovery.

Climate action and ambition must now be examined in the context of a real risk of a great depression and as countries begin to focus on stimulus packages to address the economic impact of Covid-19.

While this pandemic has put negotiations on hold, climate impacts will continue to happen, as observed most recently with Cyclone Amphan, the strongest storm on record in the Bay of Bengal.

Countries affected most severely by climate change will also need to manage evacuation centres amid the pandemic.

Governments need to think seriously about trade-offs and strings attached in the stimulus packages they put together. As stimulus packages are rolled out in response to Covid-19, NDCs must be taken into account and designed with a view to ensuring a sustainable and climate-resilient recovery.

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