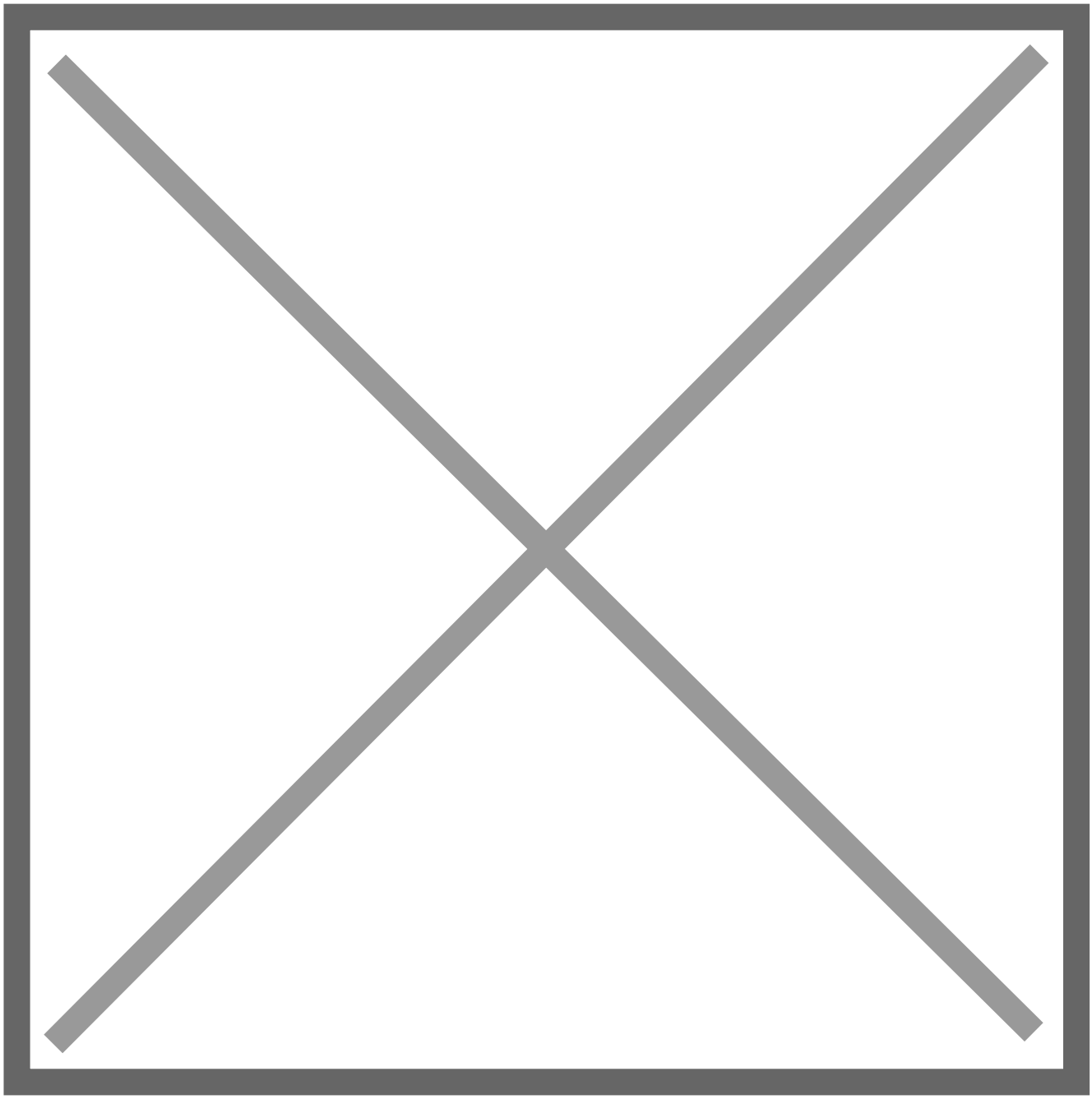


The U.N. flag is seen during the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly at the world body's headquarters in New York City Sept. 24, 2019.

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Editor's note: *This story originally appeared in PassBlue and is republished here as part of Covering Climate Now, a global journalism collaboration strengthening coverage of the climate story.*

A group of young advisers has been counseling United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on climate change as he ramps up warnings of impending “climate

calamity” and declares that protecting nature is the “defining task of the 21st century.”

The secretary-general’s Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, consisting of seven 18- to 28-year-olds from across the world, has been working since late July, giving “frank and fearless advice” to help “hold governments and corporate leaders to account on climate action,” according to the original announcement. Guterres has been sounding the alarm about climate catastrophe over the course of his term since 2017, but he has been especially vocal during the UN’s 75th anniversary year, in 2020.

His most recent annual overview of the UN, published in September, warns of a creeping “point of no return” after which the effects of climate change will become irreversible.

This worry is warranted, said Janos Pasztor, director of the Carnegie Climate Governance Initiative, speaking with PassBlue from Geneva. “We are in deeper trouble than people realize.”

The goal of keeping global warming below the all-important 1.5-degree Celsius mark, compared with pre-industrial levels, is “increasingly just a dream,” said Pasztor, who is a former UN assistant secretary-general for climate change. The world has already warmed by 1.2 degrees Celsius, and stalling more warming is not happening.

Countries made individual pledges to combat climate change through the Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015. But the aggregate of pledges was far from enough, and few significant players are making good on their promises. Though the window to act is closing fast, Pasztor said he was optimistic about Joe Biden’s presidency of the United States and the global youth activist movement. President-elect Biden has said the US will rejoin the Paris Agreement, after the Trump administration formally withdrew from it in November 2020.

One UN official closely familiar with the pact who asked to remain anonymous, told PassBlue that governmental and corporate leadership on climate action has been sorely lacking since the Paris Agreement’s adoption, making youth-led activism even more important for building momentum.

“One of the only areas where we were seeing leadership and movement and dynamism, progress and ground-up pressure for political change was civil society, and particularly youth,” the official said.

Disrupting the Status Quo

The youth group consists of geographically diverse climate activists, covering the UN General Assembly’s five regional groupings plus small island nations and the US. Some are students and others are professionals; four are female and all are unpaid.

They were selected through a call for nominations shared with governments and climate advocacy groups, whittled down by UN staff. The finalists were chosen from a shortlist of candidates by Guterres, who intends to meet with the group online every three or four months. The advocates’ term lasts till the end of 2021, when a new cohort will take their place.

“I never thought that I’d be in such a position, ever,” Archana Soreng, 25, told PassBlue from Sundergarh, India.

Soreng, a member of the indigenous Khadia Tribe, is a researcher at Vasundhara, an organization that promotes indigenous peoples’ rights and climate justice. She said the world has much to learn from indigenous people about living harmoniously with nature — an argument she is trying to promote through the UN advisory board.

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“Tribal communities everywhere are leading with ecofriendly ways of living,” she said, stressing a need to “rethink developmental paradigms.” Indigenous communities have “fresh air, fresh food, they have fresh water,” yet conventional parameters of development conceive of them as “backward.”

Soreng’s philosophy is likely to find sympathy with Guterres, who said that “humanity is waging a war on nature” at a UN biodiversity summit in September. “We have to change course and transform our relationship with the natural world.”

Soreng credits her climate activism to the culture of her family and tribe. “Even my surname has an element of nature,” she said. In Khadia, “soreng” means “rock.”

Another youth adviser, Paloma Costa, 28, also credits her upbringing to explain her climate activism. “My mother always taught me about the necessity of caring for the environment,” she told PassBlue from her home in Brasília, Brazil.

Costa is a legal practitioner at an environmental rights nonprofit group, the Instituto Socioambiental, and she studies constitutional environmental law at the University of Brasília. She also coordinates a climate activist group for a youth-led association, Engaja Mundo, to facilitate young Brazilians’ participation in international climate processes, like UN conferences.

The urgency of the climate crisis is apparent to Costa, as fires and exploitation wreak havoc on Brazil’s Amazon rain forest, encouraged by the populist far-right administration of President Jair Bolsonaro. Her advice to Guterres: “You have to start a revolution.”

Costa’s impatience to disrupt complacency about the climate crisis is shared with Nathan Méténier, another adviser. “We are here to destabilize the status quo,” he said to PassBlue from Edinburgh, Scotland.

Méténier, 21, works with two networks, Generation Climate Europe and Youth and Environment Europe, and studies environmental policy at the London School of Economics. His journey agitating for climate action began in France, with a national students’ group pressing for more teaching about ecology and climate at schools and universities.

Méténier is confident about what he and his colleagues can accomplish. “There is real will from the UN to make it meaningful,” he said, referring to the advisory group. But having dealt with the European Union, Méténier is sensitive to the risk of tokenism.

“The EU is extremely good at doing tokenistic things,” he said. “For them, a dialogue with youth is: you put a bunch of young people in a room and you ask them a question.” In Méténier’s view, dialogue is a two-way street and must be recurrent and sustained.

Ernest Gibson agrees. “Just because you get feedback once, doesn’t mean that’s the end,” he said, speaking with PassBlue from Suva, the capital of his native Fiji. You must be “constantly sourcing feedback.”

Gibson, 23, informally represents small island states in the advisory group; these countries are bearing the brunt of climate change because of rapidly rising sea levels and increasing extreme weather conditions. “I come from a region where climate change has been a hot topic for a long time,” he said.

Besides coordinating the Fijian branch of 350, a global climate pressure group, Gibson works in the UN office for Pacific Island nations. He helps run the UN75 Initiative, a yearlong series of consultations around the world dubbed a “global listening tour.”

A key takeaway from the consultations is that climate change is on the minds of people everywhere. “Looking further to the future,” beyond the immediate challenge of Covid-19, “the overwhelming concerns relate to the climate crisis and the destruction of our natural environment,” said Fabrizio Hochschild, head of the UN75 Initiative, at a press briefing in September. (Disclosure: This writer works for the initiative.)

The youth group plans to hold regular consultations of its own with other young climate activists — how Méténier and Gibson conceive of sustained feedback. (The first one took place on Nov. 17, online.) But what if the UN ends up mirroring the tokenism that Méténier feels he’s experienced from the European Union?

“We will remain activists,” he said. “We reserve the right to leave.”

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Vladislav Kaim also means to be more than a “prop,” he said, speaking from Lund, Sweden, where he is studying global economics. As the youth group’s resident economist, Kaim, 25, from Moldova, is animated by one policy objective: to promote what he calls a “green youth guarantee.”

Modeled on the EU’s youth-guarantee program — which aims to ensure that all people under 25 years old in the EU have access to employment, education or training — Kaim’s idea of a green version would involve “pipelines” through multiparty arrangements. That would give young people the skills they need for green jobs and link them with relevant industries.

This approach would help tackle climate change while addressing the pervasive problem of youth unemployment, Kaim said. “The challenges of climate change and the jobs market are complementary.”

The two other members of the UN advisory group are Nisreen Elsaim, 25, from Sudan, and Sophia Kianni, 18, of the US. Elsaim, who was designated as the group’s first chair by her peers, leads two Sudanese youth groups and was a junior negotiator on the Sudanese and African delegations to international climate conferences.

Kianni, an Iranian-American student at the University of Virginia, founded and directs Climate Cardinals, a youth association that translates documents in numerous languages to make climate information more accessible to non-English speakers.

“There really is a discrepancy in the amount of information available,” she said, speaking from McLean, Va., “which is a shame because the top 10 countries worst affected by climate change — none of them are majority English-speaking.”

When Push Comes to Shove

Activists say that the main missing ingredient for serious, collective action to tackle climate change and reverse humanity’s “descent into chaos” — as Guterres put it in a Dec. 2 speech — is political will.

“As we all know,” said Pasztor, the former senior UN climate change official, “politicians do things when they feel pushed.”

The goal of the UN and the global youth climate movement, now owning a formal institutional link, can work in tandem and strengthen one another’s hands, those involved in the coalition say.

“There is nobody in the world with bigger convening power than the secretary-general of the United Nations,” Pasztor said. But as one UN-connected activist put it to PassBlue: The UN needs allies, and so does the movement.