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U.S. President Joe Biden looks up at the United Nations leadership including Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and General Assembly President Dennis Frances after completing his address to the 78th Session of the U.N. General Assembly in New York City, Sept. 19, 2023. The United Nations held its first-ever "UN Climate Ambition Summit" on Sept. 20 with leaders from nations with concrete plans to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions -- the U.S. and China being noticeably absent. (OSV News/Reuters/Mike Segar)



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Three days after more than 75,000 activists flooded the streets of New York City in a march demanding an end to fossil fuels, the United Nations held its first-ever "Climate Ambition Summit" Sept. 20 — a conference that included 41 countries, but

excluded both the United States and China because the U.N. invited only leaders from nations with concrete plans to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions.

The United Arab Emirates, which hosts December's COP28 (Conference of Parties to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change) gathering, was also absent.

"We can — and we must turn up the tempo," Secretary-General António Guterres urged in his X (formerly Twitter) feed as the conference opened. "Now is the time to get to work on the policies, budgets and investments needed for a better, healthier, more peaceful, sustainable and prosperous world."

Each country was limited to three minutes' worth of remarks, with Guterres setting the tone as he told the assembled leaders, "Humanity has opened the gates to hell."

Recounting crops swept away in torrential floods, diseases unleashed by rising temperatures, and wildfires that destroyed towns and cities, Guterres said, "Our focus here is on climate solutions — and our task is urgent."

As the earth progresses toward a 2.8 degrees Celsius global rise in temperatures, climate instability will also increase, he warned. Nonetheless, "We can still build a world of clear air, green jobs, and affordable clean power for all," Guterres said.

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The U.N. described the Climate Ambition Summit as "a broad global coalition of 'movers and doers'" including "politicians, business and civil society" that represents a "critical political milestone for demonstrating that there is collective global will to accelerate the pace and scale of a just transition to a more equitable renewable-energy based, climate-resilient global economy."

"What we need is fairness," said Kenyan president William Samoei Ruto in his remarks to the assembly. "A fair financial system; fair market access for green assets, products, and services; fair national (and) regional trade mechanisms which promote fair competition to facilitate efficient deployment of capital in locations offering the highest comparative advantage for global de-carbonization."

The inaugural Africa Climate Summit 2023, or ACS23, took place Sept. 4-6 in Nairobi, Kenya. Ruto described it as "a critical opportunity for us to accelerate global energy

transition and deliver African solutions to the COP28 in Dubai."

At the conclusion of ACS23, African leaders adopted the Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change and Call to Action, urging, "a comprehensive and systemic response to the incipient debt crisis outside default frameworks to create the fiscal space that all developing countries need to finance development and climate action."

"The European Union has set ambitious emission reduction goals for 2030. We want to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% at least," European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen told the summit. "And the good news is, we are on track to overshoot this goal already. But similar ambition is needed by other major emitters, to ensure that global emissions peak by 2025 and unabated fossil fuels are phased out well before 2050."

Addressing the concerns of Ruto and leaders of other developing nations, von der Leyen said in the next five years, the EU "will invest at least 4 billion euros in renewable energy and hydrogen in developing economies as part of our 300 billion euro Global Gateway plan."

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On Sept. 18, Pope Francis joined former U.S. President Bill Clinton via livestream for a climate change conversation event held by the Clinton Global Initiative. Founded in 2005, the initiative collaborates with over 10,000 other organizations to address urgent global issues such as climate change and the worldwide refugee crisis.

Francis told Clinton, "It's time to work together to stop the ecological catastrophe, before it is too late."

On Oct. 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, the pontiff plans to publish a follow-up to his landmark 2015 environmental encyclical, "*Laudato Si*'."

Catholic groups concerned with the climate shared with OSV News their hopes for the U.N. Climate Ambition Summit.

"The northern hemisphere has just experienced the hottest summer on record, creating devastation for people, plants and animals. And as with most weather-related disasters, those living on the margins have suffered the worst impacts and have the longest roads to recovery," said Dan Misleh, founder of the Catholic

Climate Covenant, a Washington-based consortium of 20 national organizations formed in 2006 with the help of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"It is our hope that this Climate Ambition Summit generates a deeper appreciation for our climate predicament and that all leaders — business and political, secular and religious — feel and embrace the urgency of the climate crisis and provide hope for future generations," Misleh said.

"As a country and as the largest faith community in the country, we have an obligation to do all we can to reduce our own carbon footprint through ambitious energy transition programs, examination of our carbon intensive lifestyles, and a recognition that we have the means, if not the will, to care for those who suffer the most from our neglect," he added.

Related: Catholic groups join sea of protesters in New York march against fossil fuels

The Laudato Si' Movement, a broad range of worldwide Catholic organizations and grassroots members whose circles and chapters undertake initiatives to implement the changes Francis called for in his 2015 encyclical, also voiced its concern for both the climate and the poor.

"We at the Laudato Si' Movement are hopeful for the courageous leadership of those at the Climate Ambition Summit to act with the urgency and magnitude that our ecological crisis demands," said Anna Johnson, group's North America senior programs manager.

"As Pope Francis has said during this Season of Creation, we are called 'to put an end to the senseless war against creation,' and the transformation of public policy is essential to move back towards being in right relationship with God, each other, and all creation," she noted. "We pray that all world leaders listen to the cries and witness of those most impacted, and respond with bold, expedient, and concrete action to meet science-based goals for the health and well-being of all of God's creation."

This story appears in the **COP28 Dubai** feature series. View the full series.