

## Plastic pollution

### UN plastics treaty talks fail after US joins petrostates in blocking action

Delegates criticise role of Trump administration in siding with Saudi Arabia and other petrochemical producers



The sixth round of UN plastic treaty talks ended in a deadlock after two weeks, including an extended final session  
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## **Madeleine Speed** in Geneva

Published 2 HOURS AGO

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Countries failed to agree on the world's first legally binding treaty on plastic pollution in a final round of UN talks after three years of negotiations, dealing a blow to multilateral decision-making marked by the resistance of the US.

While the majority of more than 170 countries were prepared to compromise to secure a treaty in Geneva on Friday, the US refused to agree to anything beyond voluntary measures, national delegates told the Financial Times.

This followed the long-running opposition of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and a number of other petrostates which would not budge from their refusal to agree measures that address the production of plastic, rather than only waste management.

Delegates from countries that were pressing for greater action to deal with plastic production, meanwhile, did not agree to a treaty based heavily on voluntary measures, which was put forward in two new drafts. The talks ended in a deadlock

after two weeks, including an extended final session.

“We were ready to negotiate and a lot of countries were,” said Danish environment minister Magnus Heunicke, on behalf of the EU, following the closing plenary on Friday morning. “But I recognise that some countries at this point are not ready to examine how they can move on and bend their red lines. That’s what they have to do.”

About 100 countries sought to limit production, and many also wanted measures to address the toxic chemicals used to make plastics.

Ian Fry, delegate from the island nation Tuvalu, said multilateralism had been “smashed” by the Trump administration. “Over 100 countries want something to happen and we are being held up by the United States. Their position was even more regressive than the Saudis,” he said.

But UN Environment Programme executive director Inger Andersen held back from criticism, noting the presence of a negotiating team. “It is very difficult in a US context to get a treaty for ratification through House and Senate. It’s always been difficult . . . But they are participating in good faith which is critical and they have not left, which is essential for us.”

Agreement on how the clean-up measures would be funded was also a sticking point, with traditional donor countries less able to commit funding because of their growing defence spending commitments, delegates told the FT.

It was not clear on Friday when or where the negotiations would resume.

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Saudi Arabia delegate Abdulrahman al-Gwaiz gives his reservations on the matter © Reuters

Despite the failure of an agreement, officials said some diplomatic progress had been made during the final talks.

China, one of the world's biggest plastic producers, and the EU had productive discussions, one delegate said, observing that the country had stepped up its engagement in multilateral discussions.

But after the negotiations dragged into the early hours of Friday morning, delegates expressed deep discontentment that yet another round of talks had collapsed. It was the sixth in the series and had been expected to be final.

"We are frustrated by the slow progress," said Barirega Akankwasah, the head of delegation for Uganda, which has also opposed measures that tackle plastic production.

The main obstacle was that delegates were not sticking to the treaty mandate, he said. "We still have a lot of the debate geared towards fossil fuels . . . plastic pollution does not mean plastic volumes."

More than 460mn tonnes of new plastic are produced each year and about 20mn tonnes are estimated to end up in the environment, entering into the ecological system and human bloodstream.

The Center for International Environmental Law's David Azoulay said it became clear during the final days of the negotiations that some countries did not come to finalise a text but to block a viable treaty.

"It's impossible to find a common ground between those who are interested in

protecting the status quo and the majority who are looking for a functional treaty that can be strengthened over time,” Azoulay said.

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