Afghanistan says to attend UN climate talks, first since Taliban takeover

AFP – An Afghan delegation will attend the upcoming UN climate change summit in Azerbaijan, the foreign ministry spokesman told AFP on Saturday, marking a first since the Taliban government came to power.

Afghanistan is ranked as the country sixth most vulnerable to climate change and Taliban authorities have pushed to participate in COP summits, saying their political isolation shouldn't bar them from international climate talks.

Having tried and failed to attend UN climate change summits in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, this year an invitation from COP29 hosts Azerbaijan came through.

"A delegation of the Afghan government will be in Baku" for the summit, which opens on Monday in the Azerbaijani capital, said foreign ministry spokesman, Abdul Qahar Balkhi.

It was not immediately clear in what capacity the delegation would participate at COP29, but sources indicated it would have observer status.

No state has recognised the Taliban authorities since they swept to power in 2021, ousting the Western-backed administration.

Officials from the country's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) have repeatedly said climate change should not be politicised and called for environment-related projects put on hold due to the Taliban takeover to be reinstated.

"Climate change is a humanitarian subject," deputy NEPA head Zainulabedin Abid told AFP in a recent interview.

“We have called on the international community not to relate climate change matters with politics.”

Azerbaijan, a fossil fuel-rich former Soviet republic wedged between Russia and Iran, will host the COP29 from November 11-22.

Baku reopened its embassy in Kabul in February this year, though it has not officially recognised the Taliban government.

NEPA had been invited to other environmental summits in the past but did not receive visas, the agency’s climate change director, Ruhollah Amin, told AFP in a recent interview.

The agency has received an invitation and is working on securing visas to attend the UN summit on desertification in Saudi Arabia, Amin added, but it’s unclear if they will receive them or what level of participation they would have.

Afghanistan was a signatory to the 2015 landmark Paris Agreement, under which almost every country in the world agreed to slash emissions to limit soaring global temperatures.

NEPA was preparing its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) — expected to be updated and strengthened every five years — before the Taliban came to power.

— ‘All aspects of our life’ —

NEPA has since been working to complete the NDC, despite uncertainty that it would be acknowledged by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat.

“In 2023, we decided that at least we have to finalise this document, even if the secretariat accepts this or not,” said Amin.

“But as a national issue… we have to complete this document.”

NEPA director-general Mawlawi Matiul Haq Khalis – a former Taliban negotiator and son of prominent jihadist figure Mawlawi Yunus Khalis – had criticised Afghanistan's exclusion from last year's COP in Dubai and urged other nations to facilitate the country's participation in Baku, local media have reported.

He also called for Afghanistan to be compensated for damages caused by climate change.

Afghanistan's total greenhouse gas emissions were only 0.08 percent as of a 2019 national report, according to Amin.

"It's very little," he said. Nevertheless, Afghanistan is one of "the most affected (countries) from the impact of climate change", he added.

"It affects all aspects of our life."

The United Nations has also called for action to help Afghanistan build resilience and for the country's participation in international talks.

Among the poorest countries in the world after decades of war, Afghanistan is particularly exposed to the effects of climate change, which scientists say is spurring extreme weather.

Drought, floods, land degradation and declining agricultural productivity are key threats, the UN development agency's representative in Afghanistan, Stephen Rodriques, said in 2023.

Flash floods in May killed hundreds and swamped swaths of agricultural land in Afghanistan, where 80 percent of people depend on farming to survive.

Reports: AFP