Nations warn of ‘obstruction’ at plastic talks

AFP- Dozens of countries warned Sunday that a handful of nations were obstructing efforts in South Korea to reach an ambitious landmark global treaty to curb plastic pollution.
With hours until negotiations are scheduled to end, delegates say a group of mostly oil-producing “like-minded countries” have refused to compromise on key sticking points.

Those include setting targets for reducing plastic production and phasing out chemicals known or believed to be harmful to human health.

“We also are worried by the continuing obstruction by the so-called like-minded countries,” Olga Givernet, France’s minister delegate for energy, told reporters.

Finding an agreement on an ambitious treaty “remains an absolute priority,” Givernet said, and “we are planning on pushing it”.

Plastic production is on track to triple by 2060, and over 90 percent of plastic is not recycled.

But while everyone negotiating in Busan agrees on the problem, they disagree on the solution.

Countries including Saudi Arabia and Russia insist the deal should focus only on waste, and reject calls for binding global measures.

They have made their position clear in documents submitted in negotiations and during public plenary sessions, though neither delegation responded to repeated AFP requests for comment.

— ‘Blocking the process’ —

“It is disappointing to see that a small number of members remain unsupportive of the measures necessary to drive real change,” said Rwanda’s Juliet Kabera.

“We still have a few hours left in these negotiations, there is time to find common ground, but Rwanda cannot accept a toothless treaty,” she warned.

Fiji’s Sivendra Michael also called out a “very minority group” for “blocking the process.”

The latest draft text for the treaty contains a range of options, reflecting the ongoing divisions. A promised new version has been repeatedly delayed.

The talks are supposed to be the final round of negotiations after two years of discussion.

The venue has only been rented until mid-morning Monday, sources told AFP.

Portuguese delegate Maria Joao Teixeira said there were real fears talks could collapse and have to be extended to another round elsewhere.

“We are really trying to not have a weak treaty,” she told AFP.

Environmental groups have pushed ambitious countries to call a vote if progress stalls.

But observers caution that risks alienating even some countries in favour of a strong treaty.

Another option would be for the diplomat chairing the talks to simply gavel through an agreement over the objections of a handful of holdouts, they said.

That too holds risks, potentially embittering the remaining diplomatic process and jeopardising adoption of a treaty down

the road.

– ‘Hope in consensus’ –

Mexico’s head of delegation Camila Zepeda said she did not favour calling a vote.

“We have hope in consensus. The multilateral process is slow, but there is a possibility of having critical mass to move forward,” she told AFP.

“Showing this critical mass helps us so that the more contentious issues can be unblocked.”

German delegate Sebastian Unger also said many countries would prefer to avoid a vote.

“If you would leave out many important countries that you want to have on board, then the effects of the treaty (are impacted),” he told AFP.

Over 100 countries now support setting a target for production cuts, and dozens also back phasing out some chemicals and unnecessary plastic products.

But representatives of China and the United States, the world’s two top plastics producers, were absent from the stage at a press conference urging ambition.

“They are still considering and we are hopeful that there will be some interest on their part,” said Mexico’s Zepeda.

“This coalition of the willing is an open invitation. And so it’s not like it’s them against us.”

Panama’s Juan Carlos Monterrey Gomez meanwhile told colleagues that “history will not forgive us” for leaving Busan without an ambitious treaty.

“This is the time to step up or get out.”

AFP