

UN chief defends plastic pollution talks after collapse

AFP – The UN environment chief insisted Monday that talks on a landmark plastic pollution treaty were not a failure, saying important progress was made despite negotiations collapsing without agreement.

“It obviously did not fail,” Inger Andersen told AFP, calling the two-year timeline for the deal set in 2022 “highly ambitious”.

“What we do have is very, very good progress,” Andersen, the head of the UN Environment Programme, said.

Nearly 200 countries spent a week locked in negotiations in Busan, South Korea, from November 25 with the goal of agreeing the world’s first treaty to curb plastic pollution.

Over 90 percent of plastic is not recycled and millions of tonnes of plastic waste litter the environment each year.

But in the early hours of Monday morning, negotiators effectively conceded defeat, acknowledging that they had failed to bridge serious divisions over the aims of the treaty.

Dozens of “high ambition” countries sought an agreement that would set targets to limit new production of plastic and phase out certain chemicals and single-use plastic products.

That was fiercely and repeatedly rejected by the so-called “like-minded” nations including Saudi Arabia and Russia, which insisted the text should contain no reference to production.

This group are mostly oil-producing countries who provide the fossil fuel used to make plastic.

The disagreement stymied progress through four rounds of talks preceding Busan, resulting in a draft treaty that ran over 70 pages and was riddled with contradictory language.

The diplomat chairing the talks sought to streamline the process by synthesising views in his own draft text, which Andersen said represented a step forward.

“We walked into this with a 77-page long paper. We now have a clean, streamlined... treaty text,” she said.

“That forward movement is significant and something frankly that I celebrate.”

– ‘Significant conversations’ –

But even the revised text is full of opposing views, and countries insisted that all parts of it would be open to renegotiation and amendment at any new round of talks.

That led environmental groups to warn that extending the so-called INC-5 talks to an INC-5.2 risks simply repeating the deadlock seen in Busan.

Andersen acknowledged that deep differences remain and “some significant conversations” are needed before any new talks.

“I do believe that there’s no point in meeting unless we can see a pathway from Busan to the treaty text being gavelled,” she said.

The final plenary of the talks saw dozens of countries back new production targets and phasing out chemicals believed or known to be harmful.

“A treaty that lacks these elements and only relies on voluntary measures would not be acceptable,” Rwanda’s Juliet Kabera said.

But Saudi Arabia’s Abdulrahman Al Gwaiz indicated that

production cuts remains a red line for many nations.

“If you address plastic pollution, there should be no problem with producing plastics, because the problem is the pollution, not the plastics themselves,” he said.

Andersen said it was clear that “there’s a group of countries that give voice to an economic sector,” but added that finding a way forward was possible.

“That’s how negotiations work. Countries have different interests, they present them and the conversations then have to take place... seeking to find that common ground.”

No date or location has yet been set for resumed talks, though Saudi Arabia and others sought to restart no sooner than mid-2025.

Andersen said she remained “absolutely determined” to win a deal next year.

“Sooner is much better than later because we have a massive problem.”

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