

# 180 countries on track to sign binding agreement to curb plastic pollution

A 10-day round of talks involving representatives from nearly 180 countries is set to begin this year in Geneva, Switzerland, with the aim of reaching a binding agreement to curb plastic pollution worldwide. After failing to reach an agreement in December last year in Busan, South Korea, the talks are set to resume this year in Geneva, Switzerland.

According to a report by the French news agency AFP, plastic pollution is now so widespread that its microparticles or tiny particles have been found on the world's highest mountain peaks, the deepest ocean floor and even in almost every part of the human body.

In 2022, UN member states pledged to take effective action by 2024. However, progress has stalled due to major disagreements in the Busan talks. While one side has spoken in favor of a global binding agreement, the other, especially oil-producing countries, have opposed limiting plastic production and wanted to focus only on waste management.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), if this problem is not solved, the amount of plastic use could triple by 2060. Meanwhile, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has said that plastic waste in soil and water could increase by 50 percent by 2040.

Will the world be able to handle plastic waste in a decade?

More than 16,000 chemicals are used in plastics. The report says that these chemicals can affect human health. However, there is a considerable lack of transparency about which chemicals are in plastics.

The harmful effects of plastics are more severe on unborn babies, newborns and young children. The effects of plastics can cause complications such as miscarriages, premature and

stillbirths, birth defects, problems with lung development, reproductive problems and childhood cancer.

Plastic waste often breaks down into tiny plastic particles, which enter the human body through water, food and breathing. Such plastic particles have been found in human blood, brain, breast milk, amniotic fluid, sperm and bone marrow. Their effects on human health are not yet fully known. However, it is believed that they may be linked to strokes and heart attacks. Researchers have advised caution in this regard. However, drugs to remove microplastics from the body are still beyond the reach of modern medical scientists.

Plastic is often seen as a cheap material. However, scientists say that when you consider the financial cost of health damage, it is actually very expensive. PBDE, BPA and DEHP – just these three types of plastic chemicals – cause health damage worth \$ 150 billion a year in 38 countries.

About 460 million tons of plastic are produced annually, half of which is disposable. However, less than 10 percent of this plastic waste is recycled.

This plastic eventually breaks down into particles so small that it not only enters the environment, but also enters the blood and human organs – the impact of which on the health of future generations is still completely unknown.

UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen said, “Although the situation is complicated, we hope that it is possible to move towards an agreement in Geneva.”

The draft document released after the Busan meeting contains about 300 unclear or controversial points. In other words, 300 points still need to be agreed upon, said Björn Biller, Executive Director of the International Pollutant Elimination Network (IPEN). The most controversial issue in the agreement is whether to limit the production of new plastics. Petroleum-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia are against such restrictions.

Another controversial issue is the creation of a list of harmful chemicals, especially PFAS chemicals, which are known as “forever chemicals” because they do not break down easily.

Björn Biller said that even if another round of meetings is needed, no one wants it. Diplomats from all countries should show progress now.

A diplomatic source said that the current global context is difficult, especially the change in the US attitude towards multilateral initiatives under the Donald Trump administration.

Meanwhile, developing countries are keen to join the talks. They may be plastic producers themselves, their economies could be affected by the deal, while others are victims of pollution and are seeking redress.

96 countries took part in the UN Ocean Conference held in Nice, France, in June. Among them, 27 European Union (EU) countries, Mexico and Senegal also demanded an ambitious agreement. They want specific targets to be imposed on plastic production and use.

Ilana Sid, chairwoman of the small island states alliance, Oasis, said the agreement should not just be about waste management, but should cover everything from plastic production to post-consumption.

Graham Forbes, head of the Greenpeace negotiating team, said governments should work for the people, not for the polluting industries. He also criticized the presence of industry lobbyists in the talks.

Bjorn Biller, executive director of IPEN, said the negotiators wanted to reach a framework agreement without going to another round. But just having a framework will not make it effective, it needs to be complemented by real implementation, financing and implementation. Otherwise, this agreement will remain just an empty shell.