UN climate negotiations were a major bummer

Maybe it was the host of the UN climate summit in Azerbaijan this month calling oil and gas a “gift of God.” Or the US, the world’s biggest oil and gas producer, reelecting a president who says “we don’t have a global warming problem” just before the conference. Then again, the biggest outcome — or disappointment, depending on how you look at it — was an incremental increase in the amount of climate aid wealthier nations committed to less affluent countries dealing with the consequences of other people’s pollution.

“We have seen the very worst of political opportunism”

Any way you look at it, the summit (called the Conference of the Parties, or COP) that fizzed out over the weekend was exasperating, particularly for delegates from parts of the world hit first and hardest by climate change.

“We came in good faith, with the safety of our communities and the well-being of the world at heart,” Tina Stege, Marshall Islands climate envoy, said in a statement shared with reporters over WhatsApp. “Yet, we have seen the very worst of political opportunism here at this COP, playing games with the lives of the world’s most vulnerable people.”

a:hover]:shadow-highlight-franklin dark:[&>a:hover]:shadow-highlight-franklin [&>a]:shadow-underline-black dark:[&>a]:shadow-underline-white”>A fossil fuel lovefest

This year’s climate conference happened to be a big fossil

fuel industry gathering. There were 1.700 fossil fuel lobbyists granted access to the summit. That includes no less than 132 senior executives and staff from oil and gas given special badges as “guests of the presidency.”

How did that happen? The conference location rotates from region to region, with regional groups choosing a host country and president. The process has led to some questionable decisions, including letting the CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company lead last year’s COP. Azerbaijan’s minister of ecology and natural resources, Mukhtar Babayev, also happens to be a former oil exec. While speaking at the summit, both Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev and OPEC Secretary General Haitham al-Ghais used similar language to describe oil and gas as a “gift from God.”

US elections that took place just days before the November 11th start of the UN summit cast another cloud over climate negotiations in Azerbaijan. In his victory speech, President-elect Donald Trump bragged about American “liquid gold, oil and gas.” Trump, who has called climate change a “hoax” and has said he’ll pull the US out of the Paris agreement, announced his pick to lead the US Department of Energy during the course of the conference: fracking company CEO Chris Wright.

“[Trump’s] push to ramp up fossil fuel production, disregard for international agreements, and refusal to provide climate finance will deepen the crisis, endangering lives and livelihoods—especially in regions least responsible for, yet most impacted by, climate change,” Harjeet Singh, global engagement director for the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative, said over WhatsApp.

That will have consequences for negotiations at next year’s COP, a critical 10-year inflection point on the 2015 Paris agreement, when countries are expected to come with more ambitious national climate plans.

This year’s summit was strange enough to strengthen calls to rethink how COP is run. Prominent signatories including former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon sent a letter to UN member states and the current head of the UN and its climate chief with suggestions. For one, they proposed establishing criteria that would “exclude countries who do not support the phase out/transition away from fossil energy” needed to meet the goals of the Paris agreement.

The COP’s “current structure simply cannot deliver the change at exponential speed and scale, which is essential to ensure a safe climate landing for humanity,” the letter says.

“Countries seem to have forgotten the reason why we are all here. It is to save lives,” Stege said. “We have to work hard to rebuild trust in this vital process.”

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