

FEATURE

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Climate crisis: UN chief lays out solutions blueprint for clean energy transition



United Nations/Florence Mondou At London Climate Action Week on Tuesday, UN Secretary-General António Guterres insisted it was time for AI to "come clean" about its environmental footprint from data centres, among other ambitious measures.

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As a deadly heatwave continued to grip Europe on Tuesday, UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued an impassioned appeal for more ambitious global action on climate change caused by fossil fuels, to prevent irreversible damage.

In [a major keynote speech](#) at London Climate Action Week, the UN chief **called on AI firms to "come clean"** on the full environmental impact of data centres in terms their carbon, water and land footprints.

The Secretary-General also highlighted how the world's dependence on oil is driving both

the climate crisis and an energy sovereignty crunch, the latter linked to massive shipping disruption in the Strait of Hormuz and the war involving Iran, Israel and the United States.

"These crises may seem separate but they share the same destructive origin: fossil fuels. And they demand the same answer: a fast, fair transition to clean energy and a surge in adaptation, resilience and climate justice for those already facing climate harm," Mr. Guterres said, in a call for political leadership to push through **global change akin to that required to phase out leaded gasoline and to ban chemicals that created a hole in the ozone layer.**

In brief: the UN plan for energy independence

- **Cut emissions fast:** emissions must peak now and reach net zero by 2050, including through a global push to curb methane pollution.
- **Accelerate clean energy:** renewables pick-up needs to continue, subsidies must end for fossil fuel projects and fossil fuel profits taxed to support vulnerable communities and the energy transition.
- **Clean up AI:** require major AI companies to disclose the environmental impact of their data centres and power them with renewable energy by 2030.
- **Ensure a just transition:** ensure the shift to clean energy creates jobs, supports communities and delivers development benefits for developing countries.
- **Boost climate resilience:** increase investment in adaptation, early warning systems and other measures to protect people most vulnerable to climate impacts.
- **Unlock fair finance:** expand affordable funding for developing countries to invest in clean energy, climate adaptation and sustainable development.
- **Defend science and truth:** strengthen trust in science, combat climate disinformation and protect environmental journalists and human rights defenders.

Earth's tipping points

It is more than a decade since world leaders agreed in Paris to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, a remarkable show of international unity, led by the UN. Today, although that Agreement stands – and despite the US officially withdrawing for a second time in January this year – [UN-backed scientists](#) warn that average annual temperatures are likely to exceed that threshold in coming years.

“Every fraction of a degree matters,” the Secretary-General insisted, as he forewarned of the irreversible damage to coral reefs unable to survive in too-warm waters, the melting ice sheets that threaten to reshape coastlines and displace millions, and the real possibility that some small island nations could disappear under the waves.

Faced with this existential scenario, “the task before us is to strictly limit the overshoot, shorten its duration and bring temperatures down below 1.5°C as fast as possible”, Mr. Guterres maintained.

‘Mother of all energy shocks’

And while he pointed out that “any peace agreement is welcome and would bring much needed relief”, in reference to a 60-day pause in hostilities to allow ongoing Iranian-US talks in Switzerland, the UN chief noted that the Middle East crisis had unleashed “the mother of all energy shocks” comparable to **the oil disruption of the 1970s and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine**.

As damaging as the Middle East war has been for highly industrialized nations, the UN Secretary-General insisted that developing countries have been hit even harder:

“It is a debt shock, a food shock, a development shock”, he told the London audience.

A just future from renewables

“The good news is – unlike every past energy crisis – we now have a clear way out, a clean way out,” the Secretary-General continued.

He noted that since 2010, the cost of solar energy has plummeted by almost 90 per cent, onshore wind by more than 70 per cent, and battery storage by 95 per cent.

Renewables avoided more than the annual carbon dioxide emissions of the US, the EU and Japan combined, Mr. Guterres said, adding that clean energy investment now attracts almost twice as much as fossil fuels.

“There are no embargoes on sunlight and no blockades on the wind,” he said.

A seven-point plan for energy independence

As part of the Secretary-General’s blueprint for a clean break with fossil fuels, he outlined seven key steps:

1: Emissions must peak immediately and fall steeply this decade, reaching net zero by 2050. The G20 group of wealthy nations “must lead” on this, as it is responsible for around 80 per cent of global emissions, Mr. Guterres said. Ambitious measures include a **global Call to Action on Methane** to reduce emissions of the gas traps around 80 times more heat than carbon dioxide, but which breaks down in the atmosphere within just a decade or two. **“The world phased out leaded gasoline. We eliminated ozone-depleting chemicals. Methane pollution must be next,”** the UN chief stressed.

2: Clean energy projects should be promoted and public subsidies ditched for new fossil fuel projects. “The eight largest fossil fuel companies reported pocketing an extra \$6.5 billion in the first quarter of this year alone...I urge governments to tax them” to help vulnerable families and communities and accelerate the shift to clean, affordable energy, Mr. Guterres said.

3: Every major AI company should “measure and publicly disclose the full environmental impact” of data centres: their carbon, water and land footprints – and commit to power every data centre with renewable energy by 2030. Today, AI data centres already consume more electricity than most nations; **“it’s time to come clean”**, the UN chief noted.

By 2030, AI data centres could use enough water to meet the basic needs of all 1.3 billion residents of sub Saharan Africa for an entire year, the UN chief said.

4: “No more extraction without development:” Mr. Guterres called for greater support for the move to clean energy in a way that benefits workers and communities everywhere

and developing countries too, driven forward by the UN Climate Conference – COP31 – in Türkiye. “The transition itself is no longer in question,” he stressed, adding: “It will be either managed or chaotic, fair or unequal, a source of stability or of greater division; and these choices are still ours to make.”

5: Protect those most at risk from climate chaos by helping them adapt, because this “saves lives, safeguards homes and communities, helps economies absorb shocks and holds societies together”, the Secretary-General insisted. Contingency systems need to be put in place before shocks become humanitarian and economic catastrophes, Mr. Guterres added. At the same time, developed countries must deliver on their “long-standing commitment to double adaptation finance, with a clear trajectory toward tripling it”, he said.

6: Support fair finance to support phasing out fossil fuels and the green transition at scale and at speed: because many developing countries face borrowing costs that are two to three times higher than in wealthier economies.

“Countries rich in renewable potential are being locked out of the clean energy revolution,” the UN chief maintained, pointing to African countries which receive only two per cent of global clean energy investment even though they possess 60 per cent of the world’s best solar resources.

Mr. Guterres highlighted the \$600-800 billion in additional lending capacity of multilateral development banks, such as the World Bank. This should be used “aggressively” to finance the infrastructure of the future and climate adaptation, along with other investment

measures such as taxing high-emitting sectors, he maintained.

Equally, “developed countries must keep their promises”, including support to the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage and the Green Climate Fund, the Secretary-General continued, noting that the \$300 billion pledged to developing countries must be delivered along with concrete steps to mobilize \$1.3 trillion a year by 2035.

7: Finally, the UN Secretary-General urged **support for science as the bedrock of truth and early warning systems** - and to tackle climate falsehoods, since “disinformation is spreading deliberately to delay climate action, entrench vested interests, and erode trust”.

Human rights defenders and journalists reporting on the climate and the environment should be protected and trust in evidence and institutions bolstered, Mr. Guterres insisted, pointing to the Global Initiative for Information Integrity on Climate Change, led by the UN, [UNESCO](#) and Brazil in support of this goal.



A warning from the trees of Kew

Receiving the Kew International Medal later in the day, the Secretary-General [paid tribute](#) to the Royal Botanic Gardens as a global centre of science and conservation, while warning that the climate crisis is already taking a toll on the natural world. Citing the loss of more than 400 trees at Kew during the 2022 drought and the growing risks facing many of its species, he said the fate of nature and humanity are inseparable.



[UN Spokesperson](#)

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Secretary-General [@antonioguterres](#) was awarded the Kew International Medal in recognition of his global leadership on climate change, biodiversity loss and collective action for people and planet.

The UN chief stressed that ending dependence on fossil fuels and accelerating the shift to renewable energy must go hand in hand with protecting forests, restoring degraded ecosystems, safeguarding oceans and defending science. “**When the climate crisis comes for the great trees of Kew, it is a warning to us all,**” he said, urging greater investment in nature-based solutions to help secure a safer and more sustainable future for people and planet alike.