

# Outlook

## **Countries agree to target plastic pollution by force at un meet, Indian proposal not included**

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In a global effort aimed at reining in the burgeoning menace of plastic pollution, countries across the world came together at the UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi on Wednesday and pledged to end plastic pollution by forging an international legally binding agreement by the end of 2024. This comes days after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) came out with a damning report stating that the rise in weather and climate extremes has led to some irreversible impacts.

“Today marks a triumph by planet earth over single-use plastics. This is the most significant environmental multilateral deal since the Paris accord. It is an insurance policy for this generation and future ones, so they may live with plastic and not be doomed by it,” said Inger Andersen, executive director, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The resolution, endorsed by heads of state, ministers of environment and other representatives from 175 nations, will address the full lifecycle of plastic, including its production, design and disposal, said the body. This is a critical shift in international policymakers’ previous approach to the crisis which focused on plastic as a “marine litter” issue. Most significantly, the mandate recommends measures to tackle plastic production and recommends addressing the toxic burden of plastic.

Dharmesh Shah, senior technical advisor with the Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment, explains the negotiation process: “The basis for the negotiations were the three draft resolutions—a joint one by Rwanda and Peru, which was endorsed by 60 countries, one by Japan and one by India. To streamline the process, the co-facilitators of the working group cluster—Canada and Ghana—merged the texts of the Rwanda-Peru and the Japan draft resolutions which then became the base document for negotiations and resulted in the final approved document by UNEA 5.2 assembly.”

The Indian text, which had proposed voluntary action, remained a separate document throughout the negotiations. India’s resolution was appreciated but received significant pushback due to its voluntary nature as most of the countries were of the view that the plastics crisis demanded binding commitments. Eventually, upon India’s insistence, the term “voluntary” was retained as an option. India was also keen on the insertion of the words “national circumstances and capabilities” in the text, which is in alignment with its position of common, but differentiated, responsibility under the Paris agreement.

Observing the treaty’s significance for India, Pinky Chandran, researcher and founding member, Solid Waste Management Round Table, says that the country had already made commitments to phase out the use of single-use plastics by 2022. “India had sponsored a draft resolution on phasing out single-use plastic at UNEA 4 in 2019. Though the resolution was watered down, India still continued its advocacy. If we take the waste picker recognition aspect, India took a lead in recognising waste pickers through the Solid Waste Management Rules and Plastic Waste Management Rules in 2016. Now, India must look at operationalising inclusion with waste pickers as equal partners,” Chandran adds.

To highlight the scale of the issue, the UNEP had also displayed exhibits made out of plastic waste collected from the Kenyan coast, offering a visual representation of key data related to the plastic pollution problem. The body claims that one million plastic bottles are purchased every minute and up to five trillion plastic bags are used worldwide every year. About 300 million tonnes of plastic waste is produced globally every year—almost the weight of the entire human population. Alarmingly, half of all plastic produced is designed for single-use purposes.

The resolution was a result of a two-week-long negotiation process between the Committee of Permanent Representatives comprising delegations from various nations. According to a press release by the UNEP, the resolution, based on three initial draft resolutions, establishes an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, which will begin its work this year. It is expected to complete the draft of the legally binding global agreement by the end of 2024.

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