



The COP27 Global Climate Summit Kicks Off in Egypt Amidst a Backdrop of Worldwide Environmental Disasters and Local Human Rights Concerns

This past Sunday, the 27th annual Conference of the Parties (COP) summit began in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, where world leaders will sit down for two weeks to discuss an increasingly dire global climate disaster. From the beginning, it has been clear that there is an undercurrent of urgency and dissatisfaction this year, especially among smaller nations that are the most affected by the volatility that climate change breeds. Many of these countries have come forward with specific plans in mind. In one of the most powerful moments of the summit thus far, Tuvaluan Prime Minister Kausea Natano delivered a speech calling for a zero-proliferation agreement that would prevent the development of further fossil fuel installations. Tuvalu is one of several small nations that have backed the idea, which although not entirely unheard of in civil society, has never been presented as a viable option to governments. Unfortunately for this coalition, the proposal comes at a time in which energy prices are skyrocketing and governments are searching for new ways to produce energy at lower costs.

Nevertheless, countries angry with the damage that big carbon producers are causing have remained relentless in their demands. Before the conference even got underway, they succeeded in getting a discussion of “loss and damage” on the agenda for the first time in the conference’s history – which is a reference to the idea that the countries who have done the most harm to the environment should have to pay reparations to the countries most affected by their actions. For years, some have managed to make dubious promises and essentially dodge the topic. Others, however, have already committed to making payments. Austria, Scotland, Belgium, Denmark, and Germany have agreed to participate in the proposed loss and damage fund, whereas New Zealand is poised to unilaterally distribute \$20 million to affected nations. It’s an admirable gesture, but a miniscule percentage of the \$2 trillion that a recent study concluded will be needed annually to fully support affected nations. Famous climate economist and leading contributor to the report, Nicholas Stern, has said that half of the \$2 trillion would come from local sources, with the rest coming from international aid.

With the stakes being so high, one would expect significant levels of peaceful civilian participation and protests at the event, as have taken place at countless previous COPs. However, human rights groups were accurate in predicting that this would not be the case this year. Since 2013, freedom of expression has steadily decreased under Egyptian President El-Sisi. According to a Human Rights Watch report written on Monday, Egyptian officials began instituting “arbitrary funding, research, and registration obstacles that debilitated local environmental groups” even before the conference began.

But interestingly, it is not climate-specific censorship that has taken center stage. Alaa Abdel-Fattah, a British-Egyptian dual citizen and political prisoner for much of the last decade, intensified his longstanding hunger strike on Sunday by refusing to drink water, stating that he intends to either die or be released in the coming days. In response, his sister, Sanaa Seif, who is also a well-known activist, has returned to Egypt to lobby for his release. In the small area Egyptian officials allowed activists to have at the event, Seif called for his release and raised concerns that the prison may force-feed him to prevent martyrdom. Prime Ministers Sunak and Macron, as well as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, have spoken to El-Sisi about his release, who has responded by saying that his “health would be preserved.” President Biden is expected to speak to El-Sisi more broadly about the state of human rights in Egypt on Friday, where Abdel-Fattah is only one of an estimated 60,000 political prisoners.



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Censorship is so extreme that even the proper functioning of the conference itself has been affected. Firewalls around the websites of entities like Human Rights Watch and Al Jazeera had to be removed after delegates complained about not being able to reference certain information. Prior to the event, Egypt had to temporarily enable communication lines such as WhatsApp calling and FaceTime that are prohibited under normal circumstances.