

Titans of business and politics pledge to fight global warming



Bloomberg/New York

Millions of people in 170 countries took to the streets to protest. World leaders lined up at the UN to pledge action. A 16-year-old girl, close to tears, shamed them for robbing her of a future.

The pressure to act on climate change is mounting. Titans of global business and politics gathered in New York this week for a series of events, including an unprecedented UN summit and the Bloomberg Global Business Forum, to acknowledge that more must be done – but fell short of saying exactly what will be done.

“Time is running out in the court of public opinion, because time is running out to address climate change,” New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told heads of state and business chiefs at the Global Business Forum on Wednesday. “It’s right for them to hold our feet to the fire.”

The stakes have indeed never been higher. Temperatures have already risen 1 degree Celsius (2 degrees Fahrenheit) since the 1880s. The world must limit that warming to no more than 2 degrees above Industrial Revolution levels, the UN has warned, to avoid the most catastrophic of droughts, floods, mass migrations and conflicts. "You can just feel the groundswell of popular sentiment, that the urgency of this is elevated," Goldman Sachs Group Inc chief executive David Solomon said during the forum.

When asked whether there's enough information out there to determine his own bank's exposure to climate change, Solomon said, "We're working on it. The answer is we're working on it." It was a response that underscored both the heightened awareness among leaders that they will be held responsible for global warming and the work that still lays ahead of them.

The meetings were still "far too much a chance for people to beat their chests and say they're making change," said Brad Cornell, a business professor at the University of California at Los Angeles. "But who is making real change?"

The UN pointed to some change that came from its Monday summit: 77 countries committed to cutting greenhouse-gas emissions to net zero by 2050; 70 countries pledged to bolster climate action plans by 2020; more than 100 business leaders aligned themselves with the goals of the international Paris climate agreement; and 12 countries vowed to contribute to a fund to help developing countries adapt to climate change.

Nobody says that's enough. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who organised the summit and called on world leaders to announce real plans at it, said as presentations concluded, "We need more concrete plans."

The UN-backed Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report Wednesday with alarming findings on fast-accelerating and potentially irreversible deterioration of oceans and glaciers.

While some of the world's most powerful leaders sounded off on climate in New York, a UN panel convened almost 400 miles (600 kilometres) away in Montreal to continue a years-long debate

over curbing emissions from airplanes. The group may decide on what kind of system to use to regulate them – a laborious and highly political process that went largely unmentioned in Manhattan. And yet there were signs in New York that the tide is turning in favor of real action.

At the conclusion of Monday's annual meeting of the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative, an industry-supported group that also met in New York, the majority of the member CEOs stuck around for a discussion on climate change. In all, nine were present at the talk, including the bosses of Exxon Mobil Corp and Chevron Corp who faced questions from students and activists as well as reporters.

"And they were listening," according to Felipe Bayon, CEO of Colombia's state-run oil giant Ecopetrol. "I'm very encouraged. As a citizen of the world, I think that a lot of things are possible."

Credited for inspiring the millions of young people who've rallied around climate change in recent days is Greta Thunberg. The teenage activist sailed to New York on a zero-emissions boat, climbed the stage at the UN summit and told the crowd of more than 300 presidents, prime ministers, CEOs, bankers and delegates that they've let down her entire generation by not acting on climate change. "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words," she said on Monday. "How dare you!"

Anand Mahindra, chairman of India's Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd, said Thunberg gives him hope, as do all of the young people calling for change. It took the youth of the 1960s protesting the Vietnam War to wake everyone up to the fact that the war needed to end, Mahindra said. He's hopeful, he said, that they can do it again to win the fight against climate change.

The movement grew so big that even US President Donald Trump, who has called climate change a myth and vowed to pull America out of the Paris pact, made an unexpected appearance at the UN summit. He stayed for 15 minutes and didn't speak. China President Xi Jinping didn't attend the summit at all – leaving the leaders of the world's two largest polluters visibly

absent from the presenters' list.

During the Global Business Forum on Wednesday, business leaders repeatedly pointed the finger at government to step up and dictate what should be done. "The more there's a clear policy framework," Solomon said, "the more you'll get a reaction and response."

Samir Assaf, CEO of global banking and markets at HSBC Holdings Plc, had one idea: "The private sector can provide debt, and national development banks can provide guarantees." To which moderator Christine Lagarde, the incoming president of the European Central Bank, responded: "So, the public takes the risk and the private takes the profits."

Green investments are proving to be less of a risk and more of a moneymaker. Solar and wind power costs have plunged so deeply that they're now the cheapest and most profitable form of new electricity in two-thirds of the world. CEOs of corporations worldwide are saving billions by cutting their plastic waste, using less, cleaner and cheaper energy and recycling.

The world will face a serious test next year. Under the Paris agreement, countries are expected to submit new, and ideally more ambitious, climate action plans every five years. The next presentations are due in 2020.

"There's an enormous gulf right now," said Kelly Levin, a senior associate at the World Resources Institute in Washington, "between current momentum and where we need to be."