**Joint Statement by UN human rights experts - Accelerate the end of the coal era to protect human rights**

**GENEVA (29 October 2021)** - In light of recent reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the International Energy Agency, the UN Environment Programme and UNICEF, the evidence regarding the outsized contribution of coal mining and combustion to causing and aggravating the global climate emergency is clear and compelling. The mining and combustion of thermal coal has devastating impacts on human health and well-being and must end. Coal use interferes with the enjoyment of a range of human rights including the rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, to life, to health, and with the rights of the child and the rights of Indigenous peoples.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Because of its immense generation of greenhouse gases, continued reliance on coal would make the commitments made in the Paris Agreement—to limit global warming to 1.5°C to 2°C—impossible to achieve.[[2]](#endnote-2) The logical conclusion is that coal must be phased out as quickly as possible. Recent scientific studies confirm that reliance on coal must be eliminated.[[3]](#endnote-3) The human right to science, which requires alignment of policy measures with best available scientific evidence, reinforces the need to accelerate the end of the coal era.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Coal-fired electricity is the largest source of global greenhouse gas emissions (carbon dioxide and methane), a major contributor to air pollution that kills millions of people annually, and a major polluter of water with toxic substances. Stationary coal burning for power accounts for 21% of the 2220 tonnes of anthropogenic sources of mercury emissions to the atmosphere annually, according to the UN Environment Programme’s 2018 Global Mercury Assessment. Combustion of coal for power generation is also a major source of toxic ash, which pollutes water and exposes fenceline communities to hazardous substances.

The International Energy Agency reported in 2021 that to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, all countries need to immediately stop construction of any new coal power plants, phase them out completely by 2030 in advanced economies and close all of them by 2040 globally.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The most recent global climate assessment (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released earlier this year, concluded that the evidence human activities have caused global warming is unequivocal and that the climate crisis is already contributing to more frequent and severe extreme weather events, floods, and wildfires as well as slow onset disasters such as drought and sea level rise.[[6]](#endnote-6) UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described the AR6 report as “code red for humanity”.

The UN Environment Program’s Emissions Gap Report (2020) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic is a warning from nature that we must act on climate change, nature loss and pollution. UNEP’s report identifies measures for a recovery that put the world on a pathway consistent with the Paris Agreement, including no new coal plants and phasing out of existing coal-fired power plants. Opportunities for ending reliance on coal are enhanced by the loss of competitiveness of coal vis-à-vis renewable technologies.[[7]](#endnote-7)

UNICEF reported that almost one billion children are living in regions facing extreme adverse effects related to climate change.[[8]](#endnote-8) UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, has said that “The world has never seen a human rights threat of this scope.”

Earlier this year, the G7 made a strong commitment to accelerate the transition away from coal, including a clear pledge to end international coal finance by the end of 2021.[[9]](#endnote-9) In addition, more than forty States have already joined the Powering Past Coal Alliance, committing themselves to 1) stop building new coal-fired power plants, 2) phase out existing coal-fired power plants, and 3) terminate all forms of financial support for coal.[[10]](#endnote-10) These three commitments need to be made by all nations in order to successfully address the intertwined global environmental crises of climate change and air pollution.

To their credit, a group of OECD nations recently announced that they will end financial support for unabated coal-fired power plants.[[11]](#endnote-11) While some elements of this agreement are a step forward, safeguards will nevertheless be needed to prevent risks to the environment and human rights from financing for unproven carbon capture storage technologies associated with coal-fired power plants.

China recently made a laudable commitment to stop building and financing coal-fired power plants in foreign countries. It needs to supplement that pledge with an end to the construction of new coal plants in China.

Unethically, sixty of the world’s largest banks have reportedly invested more than $300 billion in coal mining and coal power since 2016, led by ten Chinese banks, Citi, MUFG, Credit Suisse and JP Morgan.[[12]](#endnote-12) Also, fossil fuel companies and extractive industries are harassing and attacking climate justice activists.[[13]](#endnote-13) Private investment in coal and harassment of environmental defenders must also cease in order for businesses to fulfill their responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

In view of all these concerns and in light of the upcoming COP 26, our key recommendations for States would be as follows—

* Immediately stop building new coal-fired power plants;
* Immediately terminate all subsidies for all actions related to coal-fired power plants and mining of thermal coal;
* Immediately terminate all export financing for all actions related to coal-fired power plants and mining of thermal coal, with the sole exception of pollution abatement technologies that do not prolong the life of a power plant; and
* Require existing coal-fired power plants to be closed as soon as possible, and no later than 2030 in high-income nations, 2040 in upper middle-income nations, and 2050 everywhere else.

We would like to recommend as well that all export credit agencies, international financial institutions and public and private banks should eliminate all financing for all actions related to coal-fired power plants and mining of thermal coal.

[*Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment*](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SRenvironmentIndex.aspx) :**Mr. David Boyd***;*

[*Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes*](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SRToxicsandhumanrights/Pages/Index.aspx)*:***Mr. Marcos Orellana***;*

Endnotes

1. Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment, David R. Boyd, 2019, A Safe Climate, UN Doc. A/74/161. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Environment/SREnvironment/Pages/SafeClimate.aspx> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Climate Analytics. 2016. “Implications of the Paris Agreement for Coal Use in the Power Sector. See <https://climateanalytics.org/media/climateanalytics-coalreport_nov2016_1.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “By 2050, we find that nearly 60 per cent of oil and fossil methane gas, and 90 per cent of coal must remain unextracted to keep within a 1.5 °C carbon budget.” Welsby, D., Price, J., Pye, S. *et al.* Unextractable fossil fuels in a 1.5 °C world. *Nature* **597,**230–234 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03821-8>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights, Marcos A. Orellana, 2021, Right to Science in the Toxics Context, A/HRC/48/61. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. International Energy Agency, 2021. *Net Zero by 2050: A Roadmap for the Global Energy Sector*, <https://www.iea.org/reports/net-zero-by-2050> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. IPCC, 2021: Summary for Policymakers. In: *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, S. L. Connors, C. Péan, S. Berger, N. Caud, Y. Chen, L. Goldfarb, M. I. Gomis, M. Huang, K. Leitzell, E. Lonnoy, J.B.R. Matthews, T. K. Maycock, T. Waterfield, O. Yelekçi, R. Yu and B. Zhou (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. In Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, 2019, Climate Change and Poverty, para 61, A/HRC/41/39. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. UNICEF, 2021.*The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis*, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. G7. 2021. *G7 Carbis Bay Summit Communique: Our Shared Agenda for Global Action to Build Back Better*, Cornwall, UK, June 2021. <https://www.g7uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Carbis-Bay-G7-Summit-Communique-PDF-430KB-25-pages-3-1.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See <https://www.poweringpastcoal.org> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/agreement-reached-at-oecd-to-end-export-credit-support-for-unabated-coal-fired-power-plants.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Clément N Voule, 2021, Exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association as essential to advancing climate justice, A/76/222. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)