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Fijian Minister for Climate Lynda Tabuya. Saeed Khan/Getty

‘1.5°C to stay alive’: Pacific countries demand the world makes good on climate promises

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Leaders and delegates from countries including Australia, Germany, Nepal and Pacific nations began climate meetings in Fiji on Monday to discuss the threat of climate change to small island nations.

These meetings are a curtain-raiser for the annual United Nations climate summit known as COP31, being held in Turkey (also called Türkiye) in early November. Australia is jointly hosting and leading these Pacific climate meetings with Fiji, as part of a compromise deal struck at last year’s COP30 with Turkey.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese arrived in Fiji on Monday afternoon, and Climate Change Minister Chris Bowen promised $7.29 million towards the region’s renewables transition. Local media reports suggest a Pacific declaration could be made calling for fair representation in climate governance for small island states and guaranteed funding.

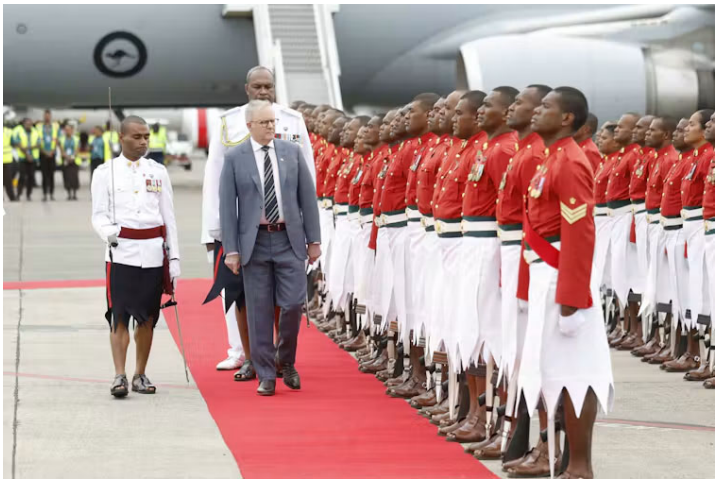
This might officially only be a pre-COP meeting, but it feels more like an Oceania COP. As of Sunday evening, there were almost 600 people registered as official country negotiators, and another 2,560 at the event from civil society, academic, activist and community groups. As well as Albanese and Bowen, former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and New Zealand’s former leader Jacinda Ardern will speak.

Australia’s engagement with the Pacific

Australia has a national interest in being the security partner of choice for Pacific countries. When the Solomon Islands signed a security deal with China in 2022 it rang alarm bells in Canberra.

Australia has since signed a web of bilateral deals to shore up Australia’s role – first with Tuvalu (2023), Naoero (formerly Nauru) (2024), Papua New Guinea (2025), Vanuatu (2026), and most recently with Fiji in July. Both the Vanuatu and Fiji agreements include a commitment that both parties will pursue a net zero economy.

On Monday, the Coalition in Australia criticised the $20 million Australia reportedly spent on this week’s Pacific meetings as a “farce” and a waste of taxpayer money. But it’s not expensive if understood as part of Australia’s broader engagement with the Pacific, both on security and climate.



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese arrives at Nadi Airport on Monday for the Pacific pre-COP31 meeting. Hilary Wardhaugh/Getty

What’s top of the agenda this week?

Well, that depends who you ask. Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka on Sunday said that he had three requests for visiting leaders: “We ask them to come, we ask them to see, and we ask them to listen with an open heart to those of us on the front line.”

1.5°C goal

The Pacific led the global fight to secure the 1.5°C temperature goal under Paris. For these countries it is not just an arbitrary number, it’s a threshold for survival – the catchcry is “1.5 to stay alive”.

At an afternoon press conference, Bowen acknowledged a recent UN report found the planet will likely warm past 1.5°C. However, Fiji’s Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Lynda Tabuya, reinforced on Monday morning the message to leaders this week is still to keep 1.5°C within reach.

COP31 envoy Kristina Stege added to this, saying that as the world gets closer to exceeding 1.5°C of warming this is not a reason to abandon the goal that represents the best chance for safety for people across the Pacific and the world. Rather, she said it should be a call to action, with any overshoot of 1.5°C as small and as short-lived as possible.

Electrification

Bowen announced a $7.29 million package to strengthen Pacific energy sovereignty and support the rollout of renewables across the region. Attendees noted, however, that this funding was part of the already-announced $50 million Australia-Pacific Partnership for Energy Transition, and not new funding.

There is part of a push towards the COP31 global goal on electrification, known as “35 by 35”, which aims to increase the share of electricity in the total global energy mix to 35% by the year 2035. Last month, Bowen visited India and Saudi Arabia, and it’s likely he would have discussed the COP31 agenda with both countries.

The UN summit work is decided by consensus and Saudi Arabia – the fourth-largest petrochemical producer in the world – is usually a blocker to action at the summit. So it’s important for Bowen, as the chief negotiator, to find a position that 190 countries can agree with – no easy feat. And it’s more politically palatable for Bowen to talk about electrification than cutting fossil fuels, given Australia’s role as one of the world’s biggest fossil fuel emitters.

Pay up for climate damage

No matter the topic of discussion at these climate negotiations, the question of finance is never far away. Pacific leaders are strongly pushing for a reframing of how this is discussed; climate finance is not aid or charity, but a legal obligation.

This was recently reaffirmed by International Court of Justice, an opinion Australia endorsed in a resolution at the UN General Assembly. Delegates at proceedings on Monday called for developed states like Australia to move from providing voluntary assistance on climate finance, to being reliable and accountable partners that fulfil their obligations.

In practice, what Pacific countries want to see is more rich, heavily polluting countries pledging financial support through the Pacific Resilience Facility, a regional financing institution designed to provide debt-free grants for climate adaptation and disaster preparedness.

Time for action

Across the calls for limiting emissions, making finance accessible, and keeping 1.5°C within reach, there is a strong desire for this meeting to set the stage for COP31 to be a summit of implementation and action.

As Stege said at an event on Saturday in Suva: “The Pacific has been standing awake and sounding the alarm for people and planet for decades.”

Now the world is in the Pacific, the region’s leaders hope they leave with a commitment to action and keeping 1.5 alive.

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