

Global Treaty on Plastic Waste

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Context:

On Tuesday (April 23), thousands of negotiators and observers from 175 countries arrived in Ottawa, Canada, to begin talks regarding the very first global treaty to curb plastics pollution. Scheduled to run till April 29, this is the fourth round of negotiations since 2022, when the UN Environmental Assembly agreed to develop a legally binding treaty on plastics pollution by the end of 2024. The final round will take place in November this year, in South Korea.

Background:

Plastic waste is everywhere, from the peak of Mount Everest to the floor of the Pacific Ocean, inside the bodies of animals and birds, and in human blood and breast milk. A global plastics treaty is urgently required to limit plastic's contribution to climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Key Takeaways:

1. Since the 1950s, plastic production across the world has skyrocketed. It increased from just 2 million tonnes in 1950 to more than 450 million tonnes in 2019. If left unchecked, the production is slated to double by 2050, and triple by 2060.
2. As plastic takes anywhere from 20 to 500 years to decompose, and less than 10% has been recycled till now, nearly 6 billion tonnes now pollute the planet, according to a 2023 study published by The Lancet.
3. Much of this plastic waste leaks into the environment, especially into rivers and oceans, where it breaks down into smaller particles (microplastic or nanoplastic). These contain more than 16,000 chemicals which can harm ecosystems and living organisms, including humans.
4. Plastic production and disposal are also contributing to climate change. According to a report by the OECD, in 2019, plastics generated 1.8 billion tonnes of GHG emissions — 3.4% of global emissions. Roughly 90% of these emissions come from plastic production, which uses fossil fuels as raw material.

What can the treaty entail?

1. Experts believe that the proposed treaty will be the most important environmental accord since the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change.
2. While none of the treaty's details have currently been finalised, experts believe that it can go beyond just putting a cap on plastic production in UN member states. The treaty can theoretically lay out guidelines on how rich nations should help poorer ones meet their plastic reduction target.
3. It may also ban "particular types of plastic, plastic products, and chemical additives used in plastics, and set legally binding targets for recycling and recycled content used in consumer goods," according to a report by the Grist magazine.

4. The treaty can mandate the testing of certain chemicals in plastics.
5. It can also have some details on just transition for waste pickers and workers in developing countries who depend on the plastic industry for a living.

What are the roadblocks to the treaty?

1. Some of the biggest oil and gas-producing countries, as well as fossil fuel and chemical industry groups are trying to narrow the scope of the treaty to focus just on plastic waste and recycling.
2. Treaty negotiations, so far, have been deeply polarising. Since the first round of talks in Uruguay in November 2022, oil-producing nations like Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Iran have opposed plastic production caps, and are using myriad delay tactics (like arguing over procedural matters) to derail constructive dialogues.
3. On the other end, there is a coalition of around 65 nations — known as the “High-Ambition Coalition” — which seeks to tackle plastic production. The coalition, which includes African nations and most of the European Union, also wants to end plastic pollution by 2040, phase out “problematic” single-use plastics, and ban certain chemical additives that could carry health risks.
4. The US has not joined the HAC. While it has said it wants to end plastic pollution by 2040, unlike the HAC, it advocates that countries should take voluntary steps to end plastic pollution.

