

# Nearly all countries agree to stem flow of plastic waste into poor nations

US reportedly opposed deal, which follows concerns that villages in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia had 'turned into dumpsites'



Trash pollutes the beach in Bali, Indonesia. Photograph: Johannes Christo/Reuters

Almost all the world's countries have agreed on a deal aimed at restricting shipments of hard-to-recycle plastic waste<sup>1</sup> to poorer countries, the United Nations announced on Friday.

Exporting countries – including the US – now will have to obtain consent from countries receiving contaminated, mixed or unrecyclable plastic waste. Currently, the US and other countries can

send lower-quality plastic waste to private entities in developing countries without getting approval from their governments.

Since China stopped accepting<sup>2</sup> recycling from the US, activists say they have observed plastic waste piling up in developing countries. The *Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (Gaia)*, a backer of the deal, says it found villages in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia that had "turned into dumpsites over the course of a year".

"We were finding that there was waste from the US that was just piled up in villages throughout these countries that had once been primarily agricultural communities," said Claire Arkin, a spokeswoman for Gaia.

The legally binding framework emerged at the end of a two-week meeting of UN-backed conventions on plastic waste and toxic, hazardous chemicals that threaten the planet's seas and creatures<sup>3</sup>.

The pact comes in an amendment to the *Basel convention*. The US is not a party to that convention so it did not have a vote, but attendees at the meeting said the country argued against the change, saying officials didn't understand the repercussions it would have on the plastic waste trade.

Plastic debris clutters pristine land, floats in huge masses in oceans<sup>4</sup> and entangles and endangers wildlife. Less valuable and harder to recycle plastic is likely to end up discarded rather than turned into new products.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/plastic>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/feb/21/philadelphia-covanta-incinerator-recyclables-china-ban-imports>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/06/human-society-under-urgent-threat-loss-earth-natural-life-un-report>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/feb/27/worlds-deepest-waters-ultimate-sink-plastic-waste>

The deal affects products used in a broad array of industries, such as healthcare, technology, aerospace, fashion and food and beverages.

Rolph Payet of the *United Nations Environment Program* called the agreement – signed by 187 countries in Geneva, Switzerland, under the convention – “*historic*”, because countries will have to monitor where plastic waste goes when it leaves their borders. Payet said the negotiations, which began 11 days ago and brought together 1,400 delegates, had gone much further than anticipated.



He compared plastic pollution to an “*epidemic*”, with “*an estimated 100m tonnes of plastic [110m US tons] now found in the oceans, 80 to 90% of which comes from land-based sources*”.



A man carries plastic bottles for recycling in Nairobi, Kenya. Photograph: Ben Curtis/AP

The *Basel convention* sets rules for first-world countries shipping hazardous waste to less wealthy nations. Backers say the amendment will make the global trade in plastic waste more transparent and better regulated, protecting humans and the environment.

The US and other countries now will not be able to send the plastic waste to developing countries that are part of the *Basel convention* and are not part of the *Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development*, a press release from major advocacy organizations explained.

Officials attributed the progress partly to growing public awareness – reinforced by documentary films by the British naturalist Sir David Attenborough and others – of the dangers of plastic pollution, especially to marine life.



“It was those iconic images of the dead albatross chicks on the Pacific Islands with their stomachs open and all recognizable plastic items inside it, and most recently, it’s been when we discovered the nanoparticles do cross the blood-brain barrier, and we were able to prove that plastic is in us,” said Paul Rose, expedition leader for the *National Geographic “pristine seas”* expeditions, aimed at protecting the oceans.



Recent images that went viral of dead whales washing up with hundreds of pounds of plastic garbage in their stomachs also widely shocked the public.

A new online petition entitled “*Stop dumping plastic in paradise!*” has attracted almost a million signatures in the past week.

The new rules will take a year to come into force.

Von Hernandez, global coordinator for *Break Free from Plastic*, said the deal is

“a crucial first step towards stopping the use of developing countries as a dumping ground for the world’s plastic waste, especially those coming from rich nations”.

Marco Lambertini, director general of the environmental and wildlife charity *WWF International*, said the accord is a welcome step and that for too long wealthy countries have abdicated responsibility for enormous quantities of plastic waste.

“However, it only goes part of the way. What we – and the planet – need is a comprehensive treaty to tackle the global plastic crisis,” Lambertini added.

