Europe plans aggressive new laws to phase out fossil fuels

European officials are preparing to introduce ambitious legislation designed to wean one of the world's biggest and most polluting economies off fossil fuels far more quickly than other nations have pledged to do. The proposals could include phasing out coal as an electricity source as well as imposing tariffs on polluting imports — an idea with the potential to set off global trade disputes.

The European Commission's package of around a dozen legislative proposals, expected on Wednesday, is designed to swiftly reduce the emissions of planet-warming gases and meet an ambitious climate goal, already enshrined in law: The 27-nation bloc has said it will cut its emissions of greenhouse gases by 55 percent by 2030, compared to 1990 levels.

The legislation is expected to be in sharp contrast to vague aspirations by various other countries to neutralize their emissions by midcentury. "It's not just a big promise," said Jennifer Tollmann, a Berlin-based analyst for E3G, a research and advocacy group that works on climate policy.

The proposals, known as "Fit for 55," are just that — proposals. They will take many months to negotiate among the 27 member countries and the European Parliament before becoming law. And they will most certainly invite scrutiny of Europe's own reliance on extracting and burning fossil fuels in its own territories, from oil and gas drilling in the North Sea to coal mining in countries like Germany and Poland.

The most contentious element is something called a border carbon adjustment tax. It would impose tariffs on the greenhouse gas emissions associated with products imported from outside the European Union and, in effect, would protect European companies from goods made in countries with less-stringent climate policies. Among the products that it could target, according to a draft leaked in June, are steel, cement, iron and fertilizers.

This carbon border tax could not only shake up global trade and invite a dispute over protectionism in the World Trade Organization, it could also create new diplomatic fault lines ahead of international climate talks taking place in Glasgow in November.

President Biden, center, with Charles Michel, right, the president of the European Council, and Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, in Brussels last month.Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

The gathering in Glasgow is an important moment for big emitter-nations to show what they will do to address the emissions of greenhouse gases that have set the world on a path to dangerous warming. Scientists have said the world as a whole needs to halve emissions by 2030, which would require history's biggest polluters, namely the United States and Europe, to make the sharpest, swiftest cuts.

All eyes are on targets set by the United States and China, which currently produces the largest share of greenhouse gases, and, more important, how they will get there.

China and India have publicly criticized the idea of a carbon border tax. Japan isn't keen. And the United States has said only that it is evaluating the idea of its own carbon border tax.

Exactly which products the tax would target is still unclear. The United States, for instance, is particularly concerned about the potential effect on American-produced steel, and it remains to be seen whether the border tax proposal would take into account the carbon emissions intensity of imported steel.

The United States is in a tricky position with respect to a prospective European border tax. The Biden administration is keen to restore trans-Atlantic alliances, including on climate change. And yet, with no prospect of carbon pricing legislation in the United States, several U.S. companies could be vulnerable.

The Biden administration has dangled the prospect of a carbon border tax of its own, though its prospects would likely be dim in a divided Congress. "It's not off the table, certainly, in any of the discussions," the White House climate adviser, Gina McCarthy, said Tuesday at a conference organized by Bloomberg. "There are many ways in which you could look at a carbon border adjustment as an opportunity here."

Other aspects of the legislative package are likely to be contentious within the European 27-country bloc itself. Efforts to phase out the sales of new internal combustion engine cars for instance are likely to face objections from some European carmakers. (Bloomberg reported this week that France opposed a proposed 2035 ban on new gas-burning car sales.) Efforts to phase out coal from electricity generation are likely to face opposition from countries with large coal operations, like Poland and Hungary.

The timing of the European draft legislation is key, designed to highlight Europe's position on advancing climate policies and put pressure on other major emitters, including China and the United States.

"This will be the first attempt to say that it's not only numbers we commit to, but we have a set of policies, very precise policies," Laurence Tubiana, the head of the European Climate Foundation and the former chief climate negotiator for France in the United Nations climate talks, said in an emailed statement. **NYTIMES**

French Ambassador asks Taliban to end military offensive, destruction of vital infrastructures

From P1

encouraging symbol of this new Afghanistan you have built, is the image of all these little girls going to school every morning, wherever I went in the country, in Bamyan, in Herat, in Mazar e Sharif, in Istalef, in Charikar, in Paghman, in the valley of Panjshir or in Kabul City."

The ambassador said that every 14th of July and since 1789, everywhere in the world, the French people celebrate the beginning of the French revolution, adding this year, again, circumstances prevented them from doing so in Kabul.

"Due to the pandemic of Covid, we can't get together for real. Most of all, the situation in Afghanistan, with the increasingly high level of violence, and the drought that is impoverishing so many people, would make any celebration inappropriate, in regards to the terrible sufferings of our Afghan friends," he added.

According to Ambassador, the situation in Afghanistan was difficult, adding "our thoughts go to the brave soldiers who are defending the Islamic Republic and its democratic principles all around their beloved country."

"The French Embassy is at work, continuing to support the French medical Institute for the mother and the Child in Kabul. In this hospital, the best in town, male and female doctors perform miracles every day on Afghan babies and children who would not survive otherwise," he continued.

Ambassador Martinon said that they were also preparing the centennial anniversary of official relations with Afghanistan. "No later than 1922, when Amanullah Shah invited French archeologists to Afghanistan to unveil the wonders of Afghan's incredibly rich historical past, from Alexander the Great to the Buddhist era and the Islamic heritage. We are currently working on the Bala Hissar of Kabul, the Madrasa sultan Hussayn Baïqara of Herat, Haji Piada Mosque in Mazar, the Arch of Bust in Lashkargah, in Helmand, but also in Bamyan and Mes Aynak," he added, saying that Paris will host an exclusive exhibition of the archeological treasures of Afghanistan, in order to give the world access to the Afghan heritage.

"We are committed to celebrate this event, the centennial anniversary of our friendship, both in Paris and in Kabul, with you, next year," he concluded as saying.

The Kabul Times

Biden slams Republican state voting bills as 'un-American'

US President Joe Biden on Tuesday launched his strongest counter attack yet against his predecessor Donald Trump's false claims the 2020 election was stolen, as moves by Republicans to limit voting access gain momentum across the United States.

"In America, if you lose, you accept the results, and follow the Constitution. You try again. You don't call facts 'fake' and then try to bring down the American experiment just because you're unhappy," Biden said on Tuesday, without directly naming the former president.

"That's not statesmanship. That's selfishness. That's not democracy. It's the denial of the right to vote. It suppresses and subjugates."

Invoking the US civil rights movement of the 1960s and the historic battle for Black liberation that began after slavery, Biden delivered a fiery speech in Philadelphia condemning the drive by Republicans in several US states including Texas, Georgia, Iowa and Pennsylvania to enact new restrictions on voting following Trump's defeat.

The attempts to put in place state-level voting restrictions are widely seen as discriminatory.

"There is an unfolding assault taking place in America today, an attempt to suppress and subvert the right to vote, and fair and free elections," Biden said. "We're facing the most significant test of our democracy since the Civil War. That's not hyperbole.

"The denial of free and fair elections is the most un-American thing that any of us can imagine," he also said.

At the national level, Democrats are blocked from passing a voting rights bill in the US Senate, which is evenly divided 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans and has rules requiring 60 votes to pass new laws.

But Biden, who spoke on Tuesday at the site of Constitution Hall in Philadelphia where the US Constitution was written in 1787, called on Congress to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would protect voting rights.

The bill, drafted by the Congressional Black Caucus, is headed for passage in the US House of Representatives this year but faces an uphill battle with Republicans in the US Senate.

Al Jazeera's Kimberly Halkett, reporting from Philadelphia, said Biden has said protecting voting rights will be "a priority of his presidency".

"That's why he says he's tasking his vice president, Kamala Harris, to oversee and protect ballot access, to make sure that that is something that is entrenched as part of American democracy for generations to come," Halkett said.

Meanwhile, Texas Democrats paralysed the state legislature on Tuesday as Republicans sought to pass new legislation that would tighten voting rules in the state, part of a nationwide wave of Republican bills to restrict voting at the state level.

"Texas Republicans have failed Texas. Texas Republicans don't want free and fair elections," Texas state House Representative Toni Rose, a leader of the Texas House Democratic Caucus, told a news conference at the US Capitol in Washington, DC.

"House Bill 3 puts deliberate barriers to voting, to make it harder for Texans to cast just a free, safe, and equal vote. House Bill 3 is an attack on voters' freedoms, and democracy," Rose said.

The Republican bill in Texas would make it possible for "partisan poll watchers to harass and intimidate voters", Rose said.

More than 50 Texas Democratic legislators flew on two chartered planes from Texas to Dulles International Airport outside Washington, DC on the night of July 12.

The rare move prevents Texas Republicans from attaining the necessary quorum of 100 state House lawmakers present at the state capitol in Austin, Texas, to hold votes on legislation.

Texas Republicans planned to advance the bill – which they argue is designed to improve the integrity of the elections, not limit people's right to vote – through the state Senate as soon as Tuesday. The bill includes new identification requirements for voting by mail and a ban on 24-hour polling locations and drive-through voting.

Elsewhere, Republicans in 17 states have enacted new rules rolling back voting hours and polling locations – and tightening ID requirements, among other changes to local procedures – following former President Trump's defeat in the record-turnout 2020 election.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott warned that the Texas Democratic legislators faced arrest and he vowed to continue to call special sessions of the Texas legislature as needed to get the bill passed.

"If they do not return to work, they are risking losing their jobs as state representatives for not showing up," Abbott said in an interview with KVUE, an Austin television news station.

"If these people want to be hanging out wherever they're hanging out on this taxpayer-paid junket, they're going to have to be prepared to do it for well over a year," Abbott said. "As soon as they come back in the state of Texas, they will be arrested, they will be cabined inside the Texas Capitol until they get their job done."

Texas Democrats say the legislative process in Austin was "poisoned" by Republican partisan moves beginning in May to ram the legislation through without Democratic input or adequate public transparency.

"We are not going to buckle to the big lie in Texas, the big lie that has resulted in anti-democratic legislation throughout the United States," said Texas Representative Rafael Anchia, a leader of the Texas House Democratic Caucus.

"We are happy to vote on bipartisan proposals that expand the right to vote, that make it easier to vote and harder to cheat in the state of Texas, but that is not what we saw at the outset of this process," Anchia said. The US Supreme Court ruled in July that two Republican-backed voting rules in Arizona that opponents had argued disproportionately burdened Black, Latino and Native American voters could stand. That precedent could make court challenges to other voting restrictions difficult. **Al Jazeera**

Singapore says cruise ship returns after suspected COVID-19 case

Singapore's tourism board said on Wednesday a cruise ship operated by Genting Cruise Lines on a so-called cruise to nowhere had returned to the city-state after a 40-year-old passenger was suspected to have contracted COVID-19.

"The passenger was identified as a close contact of a confirmed case on land, and was immediately isolated as part of onboard health protocols," the tourism board said in a statement.

It said the passenger tested positive to a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test onboard and had been conveyed to hospital for further confirmatory testing.

The passenger's three traveling companions were identified and isolated, the tourism board said. They have tested negative for COVID-19 and further contact tracing was being done.

All on-board leisure activities on Dream Cruises' World Dream ship had ceased and passengers had been asked to stay in their cabins until test results are out and contact tracing was complete, the tourism board said.

Genting did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The ship was left Singapore on Sunday for a four-day cruise, according to a media report.

The global cruise industry has taken a major hit from the coronavirus pandemic, with some of the earliest big outbreaks found on cruise ships.