COP31

Extra Time in Antalya: Who Gets a Slice When the Cover Text Lands?

Greetings from Antalya, where the Mediterranean sits politely outside while the negotiating text misbehaves inside. COP31 is the 31st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and takes place in Antalya, Türkiye, from 9 to 20 November 2026.

COP31 is in its final stretch, and tradition says to expect extra time. By the time you read this, a deal may exist. The better question is what it will actually ask anyone to do, and who will be in the room when it does.

The document at the centre of the sprint is the cover decision, the political package that wraps up the conference. Its first draft landed on Monday: 144 paragraphs that Carbon Brief's Simon Evans called a grab-bag [1]. Chris Bowen, COP31 President of Negotiations, conceded it contains elements "that not all parties agree on", and the EU's climate envoy warned it could make the talks unworkable [2]. One daily briefing suggested it could keep delegates here until Sunday [3].

Think of it as baklava. Everyone has brought a layer, and the final sprint decides which layers survive the knife. Baklava has a known hazard, too: the more layers, the greater the chance it shatters when someone tries to serve it.

The sofa summit

On Wednesday 18 November, the Presidency reached for Ottoman history. President Murat Kurum and Bowen convened the COP31 Divan, an informal gathering modelled on the Divan-ı Hümayun, the Imperial Council that the Presidency traces back to the 15th century [4].

The invitation list covered ministers, negotiating group chairs and observer constituencies. The idea is to hear each other across the whole agenda and shape a balanced package by the end of the week.

The old council, the Presidency notes, treated diplomacy, finance and justice as connected responsibilities rather than separate files [4]. Kurum asked participants to listen and to look for where they can move together [4]. Bowen wants a message that is "ambitious, balanced and practical" [4].

I like the instinct. A COP that remembers everything is connected is closer to the truth than one that negotiates in silos. In English, "divan" also means a sofa, which is where I suspect many delegates will be by Sunday. As for ambitious, balanced and practical, life has taught me you usually get to pick two.

But every divan has a seating plan, so allow me a question from the corridor: who is not on the sofa?



Negotiators could use a hydration break of their own, ideally with a referee.
Photo credit: Osmancan Gürdoğan - Anadolu Agency

Who is not on the sofa

Start with small island states, who read tide tables the way others read newspapers. Only 0.2% of the world's climate finance goes to them for adaptation, Bowen himself noted last week [14]. Then the Least Developed Countries: The Gambia's Ebrima Jawara, heard below, describes asking for a hundred and receiving twenty-five.

Then Indigenous peoples and local communities. Indigenous advocates here have asked governments to follow through on commitments to secure land rights and provide finance, Grist reported [5]. Smallholder farmers: a New York Times photo-essay shows Malawi's growers struggling through a super El Niño, with drought-resistant seeds costing more than 14 times a day's earnings [5].

Their negotiating track, agriculture, was sent to Bonn again [5]. Women and young people, who will live longest with whatever we decide today.

To its credit, the Divan invited observer constituencies, a category that includes Indigenous peoples, women, youth, farmers and trade unions. But a constituency seat is not a village seat.

Meanwhile DeSmog counted more than a hundred lobbyists attending as members of government delegations, which gives them privileged access to the negotiations [5]. Some people do get a seat on the sofa, and a cushion.

I do not say this to sour the mood, which is quite sour enough given the reactions to the draft. I say it because the cover text will be judged not by its adjectives but by what changes for people who were never in the room.

The verbs that will decide it

The draft mentions oceans 21 times, expresses deep concern for marine ecosystems and encourages parties to accelerate ocean action. It welcomes the Brazil-led deforestation roadmap and includes nature-based solutions, but "food systems" have gone missing [5]. Small island and African states are pushing for an ocean roadmap to feed the 2028 global stocktake [5].

Read the verbs. In UN language, "decides" is a contract, "welcomes" a handshake, "encourages" a pat on the back, and "notes with concern" a sigh with a footnote. The new Antalya Ocean and Seas Compact encourages and invites; the Rio Synergies Group is designed to work "without creating new commitments or reporting requirements" [6]. Useful, but voluntary.

Canada's former environment minister Steven Guilbeault argues there is nothing on oceans in the text that should trouble anyone serious about climate [5]. Fair. The harder question is whether a nudge is enough for coastlines that are already eroding.

Who is asking the hard questions? Among the voices who read the fine print, here are three, who have been generous to share in brief personal interviews after their speeches.

Patricia Scotland: small money, big levers

The former Commonwealth Secretary General describes a hub hosted by a small island state:

"The Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub ... is the most creative instrument to deliver real value in climate change finance. With just eight million dollars, we have already delivered, in 2026, five hundred and sixty-six million dollars. It really should be used as a model to ensure that all our Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States receive the money they need for adaptation, mitigation and climate change finance." [7]

Her toolbox: "the debt swaps, the pooled assessment, but also the vulnerability index, and the opportunity to take advantage of the debt clauses in all loan agreements." [7] Fine print, for once, working in our favour.

I cannot confirm the 2026 figure, but the scale is public: seed funding of USD 7.8 million had mobilised about USD 322 million by December 2023 [8], and the Commonwealth counts roughly USD 590 million since 2016 [9]. Note the verb: mobilised, not disbursed.

Ebrima Jawara: a hundred requested, twenty-five received
Ebrima Jawara, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Natural Resources of The Gambia, speaks for every small economy that has filled in a funding form:

"With all the projects we had, which were donor-funded, one thing became very clear: the funds were never enough. If you needed $100 million, you might be given $25 million. So you couldn't really achieve what you wanted to achieve." [10]

His remedy starts at home: "We need to start looking at how we tap into resources from internal funds and encourage internal innovation. We have always had this perception that something coming from outside is better than what we have inside. But that is not necessarily true." [10]

Then the carbon question: "Now, carbon markets are a relatively new innovation for many of us. Most of us do not yet have the capacity to fully understand what is going on. We do not necessarily understand the financial mechanisms, how the transactions are structured, or how the revenues are calculated. And the question is: are we actually receiving a fair share of the revenue? We do not know." [10]

His answer is capacity: understanding how carbon trading works and how returns are distributed, "so that we are not cheated." [10] The point is not abstract. Carbon Market Watch, criticising a national forest-carbon approach, pointed to an investigation in which a single spreadsheet error reportedly produced 3.9 million excess credits [5].

A spreadsheet is a fine servant and a terrible auditor.

Astrid Schomaker: from the sustainability department to the boardroom
The Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity brings the lesson of the Yerevan talks:

"What we find is that we have to stop fiddling around the edges and really move towards transformative change. ... But that is a discussion that cannot simply happen within the sustainability department. It has to move straight into the boardroom, where the big investment decisions are being made." [11]

On money: "Here, we see that finance is abundant. There is a lot of money circulating in the economy. But the question is where that money is going, and whether it is actually reaching the beneficiaries it should reach."

She says roughly thirty times more finance flows to nature-harming activities than to positive outcomes, adding: "This needs to be turned around. But it cannot be turned around simply by spending more money or introducing another green credit initiative here or there. It means changing the entire financial system." [11]

UNEP's figures are in that range: USD 7.3 trillion against USD 220 billion for nature-based solutions [12]. The comparison is not like-for-like, but the direction is clear.

And on the last mile: "How do we make sure that the money does not stop with the proverbial middleman, if you will, but actually reaches the stewards on the ground? I am talking about Indigenous peoples and local communities, who often know best how to adapt, how to mitigate environmental risks, and how their surroundings are changing." [11]

Middlemen, I note, are the only stakeholders guaranteed to attend every meeting.



Robots pause at COP31. Photo credit: Doğukan Keskinkılıç - Anadolu Agency

What survives the sprint

The three speakers above share one question: where does the money actually land, and who can read the contract?

The summit rhetoric looks different. At the midpoint, most leaders avoided naming fossil fuels, and the USD 300 billion finance goal and the tripling of adaptation finance were drifting into bargaining-chip territory [13]. The forest fund is USD 1.8

billion short of its 2026 target, built largely on conditional loans, and one analyst doubts it can deliver its promised payments per hectare [5]. And a conference championing electrification reportedly runs on three million litres of biodiesel [5].

Even the lights, it seems, need a transition plan.

So when the text lands, I will check four things.

First, the verbs: does anything "decide", or does everything "encourage"?

Second, the address: does money come with a name, a date and a recipient?

Third, the fine print: can a small ministry read it without hiring a battalion of consultants?

Fourth, the guest list: did the people who live with the consequences shape the sentence, or only receive it?

Small island states know something the negotiators sometimes forget: the tide does not do extra time. When the gavel falls, check the verbs, the money, the fine print and the guest list.

Only then reach for the baklava.

References

[1] Carbon Brief, daily briefing on the draft cover text, 17 Nov 2026.
[2] Al Jazeera, "Tensions rise over draft climate deal at COP31", 17 Nov 2026.
[3] Climate Diplomacy Brief, COP31 day 8, 17 Nov 2026.
[4] COP31 Presidency press release on the Divan, Antalya, 18 Nov 2026.
[5] Carbon Brief, newsletter on food, oceans and forest finance, Nov 2026 (citing Grist, DeSmog, New York Times, Climate Home News, Carbon Market Watch).
[6] COP31 Presidency press release, ocean and nature, 17 Nov 2026.
[7] Patricia Scotland, recorded interview, at COP31.
[8] Commonwealth, "Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub grows from strength to strength", Dec 2023.
[9] Commonwealth Secretariat, CCFAH submission to the UNFCCC.
[10] Ebrima Jawara, recorded discussion, at COP31.
[11] Astrid Schomaker, recorded interview, at COP31.
[12] UNEP, State of Finance for Nature 2026 summary.
[13] Briefing note, key messages from the COP31 Leaders' Summit.
[14] COP31 Presidency press release, 14 Nov 2026.