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**SANTA MARTA, COLOMBIA: A POSITIVE
TURN BUT NOT A SILVER BULLET**

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JUNE 2026

COLUMN

Santa Marta, Colombia: A Positive Turn but Not a Silver Bullet

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The first Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels was convened in Santa Marta, Colombia from 24 to 29 April 2026. The Conference was attended by some fifty-seven (57) countries with the clear intention to discuss the transitioning away from oil, coal and gas. The Conference was co-chaired by Colombia and The Netherlands and was preceded by an academic pre-conference which was attended by some four hundred (400) global scientists.

It is interesting to note that China, Russia, the United States, India and Saudi Arabia were not at the Conference. The organizers indicated that they were intentional in their invitations since they were keen to avoid the divisions and difficulties that were experienced at the United Nations COP30 in Belem, Brazil.

The “Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels” (TAFF) has its genesis in the outcome of the United Nations COP28 in Dubai in 2023 where the Global Stocktake had indicated that there were numerous gaps in emissions, adaptation and finance. Consequently, the global community was not on track to achieve 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels by 2100 which was established by the Paris Agreement. It was therefore critical for the global community to deal with these findings with urgency and significantly reduce the consumption of fossil fuels.

The Conference in Santa Marta, Colombia, in large part, was the result of the frustration of several countries at the slow pace of progress and the failure of global climate diplomacy. Santa Marta therefore presented a “safe space” for countries interested in transitioning away from fossil fuels outside of the United Nations system and prepared to deal with the constellation of issues related to making that change. The Conference was, in large part, a meeting of the “coalition of the willing”.

The Conference has acknowledged that the movement away from fossil fuels presents several challenging economic and financial issues. The war in the Middle East has exposed the vulnerability of the present energy ecosystem and therefore the need to transition to other more reliable systems. The war has unleashed an energy shock and has also laid bare the weakness of international law and the international rules-based system which has been in place since the Second World War. Ironically, some countries have sought to redouble their efforts at renewables while others have also accelerated their prospecting for fossil fuels and increased the use of coal.

At the Conference despite the enormous technical, social, and financial challenges associated with transitioning away from fossil fuels a few countries were prepared to elaborate transition roadmaps.

The Santa Marta Conference has introduced some interesting developments in its outcome document. The first decision was to confirm that there will be a second conference in 2027 in the Pacific to be co-hosted by Tuvalu and Ireland. The Conference has also established workstreams to deal with national and regional roadmaps connected to national climate plans; a science panel to support the global energy transition; and a financial mechanism to assist countries with treating with high debt profiles and energy subsidies. The OECD Secretariat has agreed to support countries as they transition from fossil fuel intensive trade to a fossil fuel free trade system. Several of the challenges faced by countries making the transition are difficult and somewhat aspirational but they acknowledge that in the near term and longer-term climate action is necessary.

The Presidency of COP30, Brazil, will prepare a document on the Santa Marta Conference to be presented to COP31 in Turkey. It is to be noted that the Conference has attempted to ground the recommendations firmly in reliable science. The science panel that has been launched is intended to

provide rapid analysis for countries and multilateral settings on how to transition away from fossil fuels. Further, the Conference made a concerted effort to include indigenous people and civil society as full partners in the process and to have a seat at the table. This approach was welcomed since civil society whose numbers have grown considerably at every COP does not have a seat at the table. The UNFCCC process it to be remembered is an intergovernmental process.

The Santa Marta Conference and the COP30 in Belem, Brazil have both demonstrated that transitioning to a world that breaks the connection with fossil fuels will be extremely difficult. The global community since the Industrial Revolution has become addicted to the consumption of fossil fuels. Nevertheless, for ALL countries, particularly for Small Island Developing States, this is a bridge that must be crossed. These countries are on the frontline of the climate challenge, and their very existence is at risks.

The Santa Marta Conference is by no means a “silver bullet” but it is a move in the right direction and hopefully can influence the UNFCCC process. We remain hopeful that the Conference can break the current cycle of lofty aspiration and deep frustration in the United Nations COP process.