

## OPEN LETTER TO ASEAN LEADERS

# REDUCE PLASTIC PRODUCTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA



**Stop plastic production**  
**Stop plastic pollution**

The world gathered this week for the fifth and final meeting (INC5) to negotiate a global plastic treaty to end plastic pollution in Busan, South Korea.

Tensions are high to deliver an agreement that can adequately deal with the plastic crisis amidst opposing views on most critical issues. The coming days will be crucial.

As a region often blamed[1] for marine plastic pollution, a strong and legally binding global plastic treaty is vital to Southeast Asia (SEA) - to clean up our beaches; protect our health, habitats and ecosystems; and enhance our image.

## CALLING ON ASEAN LEADERSHIP

Last month, the ASEAN Member States gathered in Laos for the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and released the ASEAN Declaration on Plastic Circularity. [2] The region's leaders acknowledged the detrimental impacts of marine plastic debris and plastic pollution on sustainable development - environmental, social, and economic dimensions - and the increasing urgency to address the issue.

However, three elements were glaringly missing. First, the severe plastic impacts on human health, climate and the environment from the extraction of raw materials, to production, transportation, consumption, and disposal. Second, the urgent need to reduce primary plastic production. Third, the need to eliminate hazardous chemicals in plastic.

**We urge our governments to step up and negotiate a robust plastic treaty that will control the production of plastic for the sake of our health and future generations.**

The SEA plastics market size is estimated at 30.48 million tons in 2024. It is expected to reach 38.36 million tons by 2029, growing at a compound annual growth rate of greater than 4%<sup>[3]</sup> during the forecast period (2024-2029).

Increasing scientific evidence has emerged about the hazards of plastics to human health. Since 2020, over 200 microplastics studies<sup>[4]</sup> have been conducted in the ASEAN region. Populations of the SEA region have the highest microplastic rates<sup>[5]</sup> in the human body, between 80 to 490 mg per capita per day. Plastic chemicals are the leading cause of male fertility decline<sup>[6]</sup> globally, with faster declines in the global South.


Plastics contain more than 16,000 chemical additives<sup>[7]</sup> used across all plastic applications. More than 4,200 plastic chemicals have been identified as chemicals of concern because they are persistent, bio-accumulative, mobile, and/or toxic, while there is insufficient data on other chemicals.

Chemicals commonly used in plastics – as plasticisers, flame retardants, colourants, or non-stick properties in toys, clothes, carpets, cookware, and more – can lead to infertility, hormonal imbalance, obesity, and even affect brain development.<sup>[8]</sup>

Recycling these plastics will accumulate these contaminants into new products, poisoning the whole value chain and the consumers. On top of that, plastic cannot be recycled indefinitely and, thus, cannot be claimed to have circularity potential.

In Busan, the term “circular economy” is being proposed in multiple articles in the treaty text. This term sends a false sense of reassurance, further fuelling the runaway overproduction of plastic. In fact, the government of California filed a suit against ExxonMobil, accusing the company of making false claims about plastic recyclability.<sup>[9]</sup>

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**REDUCE  
PLASTIC PRODUCTION**

When considering the harms of plastic, one area often overlooked is the impact of fossil fuel extraction, petrochemical plants, and plastic production facilities on our health.

Petrochemical facilities in the SEA region are expanding,[10] banking on a projection of growth for plastic production. However, reports show that many crackers worldwide, including in the SEA region, have idle capacities, mostly below 75%[11] of their installed capacities, due to the age of the plants and stiff competition. Thailand's largest industrial conglomerate halted operations[12] in its petrochemical complex in Vietnam after only one month due to low margins.

Communities who live around petrochemical plants suffer from devastating long-term health impacts, from Chemical Valley[13] in Canada, to Cancer Alley[14] in the United States (US), to Italy, Nigeria, Spain, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom.[15] Plastic transportation also poses high risks, as seen in the X-press Pearl ship disaster[16] spilling billions of plastic pellets across Sri Lanka's coast and the vinyl chloride[17] spill in the train disaster in the US.

Closer to home, in Rayong, Thailand, an explosion at a tank storing by-products of plastic resins production caused the death[18] of one worker in May this year, while two other workers were killed[19] in a chemical tank explosion in Prachin Buri in October. In Indonesia, repeated chemical and gas leaks[20] from several petrochemical plants in Cilegon,[21] Banten, in January and February 2024 affected hundreds of people and children around the plant.

In Malaysia, in Kerteh, Terengganu, children face health problems such as respiratory disease due to pollution from three primary refinery plants,[22] while surrounding areas were also found to contain higher levels of heavy metals.[23] In Indonesia, more than 5% of students living around the Cilegon petrochemical industry clusters have one or multiple disabilities and delayed development.[24]

Among plastic facilities, between September 2023 and September 2024, 24 cases of fires or explosions occurred in plastics factories or storage in Thailand - an average of two a month.[25] Plastic factory fires and explosions are widespread across Malaysia,[26] Indonesia,[27] and Vietnam. [28] A new study in Thailand shows that a high concentration of several cancer-causing plastic chemicals[29] was detected in the blood of plastic recycling workers, which include PAHs, phthalates, phthalate alternatives, OPFRs, benzotriazole UV stabilisers, and phenols and bisphenols (e.g., BPA).

As the country delegate from Panama said on Wednesday evening at INC5, **“Plastic pollution is not just a crisis. It is an assault on our planet, on our people, and an assault on our future.”** Over fifty years of failed recycling campaigns have proven that to reduce plastic pollution, we must reduce plastic production.

## THE COST OF THE PLASTIC ASSAULT

Science has spoken. The proliferation of plastic use not only worsens our health but also threatens the stability[30] of vital Earth system processes. In terms of economics, the lifetime costs of plastics to the environment and society, including greenhouse gas emissions, waste management, and pollution (excluding human health costs), are estimated to be more than ten times[31] their market cost. Scientists estimate that diseases linked to plastics cost USD 249 billion[32] in 2018 in the US. Reducing plastic production could be economically beneficial,[33] with the net cost of inaction[34] significantly higher than the cost of reducing plastic production and pollution.

In Busan, 220 fossil fuel and chemical industry lobbyists[35] registered to participate in the global plastics treaty negotiations, the largest delegation compared to countries and other groups. Meanwhile, civil society and Indigenous Peoples had limited participation, with a proposal to further restrict participation of observers at the future governing body of the plastic treaty. We must not let them control the process.

**Our ASEAN governments must take the lead to protect our region. Ultimately, sustainable development relies on a healthy population and a nourishing environment to thrive. This can be a watershed moment to end plastic pollution and safeguard our future generations.**

### Endnotes:

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- [19] [https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2890606/t?fbclid=IwY2xjawGqfu5leHRuA2FlbQ1xMQABHFJQQ9GVuMM7SaN42hkXc-ZiMAA6qM1TaAofk9ln\\_8leRVnPz7bldc8QA\\_aem\\_teCOx8cBupwhXJPdqLgKrw](https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2890606/t?fbclid=IwY2xjawGqfu5leHRuA2FlbQ1xMQABHFJQQ9GVuMM7SaN42hkXc-ZiMAA6qM1TaAofk9ln_8leRVnPz7bldc8QA_aem_teCOx8cBupwhXJPdqLgKrw)
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