

Court convicts French state for failure to address climate crisis

State found guilty of ‘non-respect of its engagements’ aimed at fighting global warming



Environmental activists stage a protest in Paris in January before the first hearing in the case against the French state over climate inaction. Photograph: Thomas Samson/AFP/Getty Images

Kim Willsher in Paris

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A Paris court has convicted the French state of failing to address the climate crisis and not keeping its promises to tackle greenhouse gas emissions.

In what has been hailed as a **historic ruling**, the court found the state guilty of “non-respect of its engagements” aimed at combating global warming.

Billed the “**affair of the century**”, the legal case was brought by four French environmental groups after a petition signed by 2.3 million people.

“This is an historic win for climate justice. The decision not only takes into consideration what scientists say and what people want from French public policies, but it should also inspire people all over the world to hold their

governments accountable for climate change in their courts,” said Jean-François Julliard, the executive director of **Greenpeace** France, one of the plaintiffs.

He said the judgment would be used to push the French state to act against the climate emergency. “No more blah blah,” he added.

Cécilia Rinaudo, the director of Notre Affaire à Tous (It’s Everyone’s Business), another plaintiff, said it was an “immense victory” for climate activists around the world.

“It’s a victory for all the people who are already facing the devastating impact of the climate crisis that our leaders fail to tackle. The time has come for justice,” Rinaudo said.

“This legal action has brought millions of people together in a common fight: the fight for our future. The judge’s landmark decision proves that France’s climate inaction is no longer tolerable, it is illegal. But the fight is not over. Recognising the state’s inaction is only a first step towards the implementation of concrete and efficient measures to combat climate change.”

The court ruled that compensation for “ecological damage” was admissible, and declared the state “should be held liable for part of this damage if it had failed to meet its commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions”.

It did not uphold a claim for symbolic compensation, saying compensation should be made “in kind”, with damages awarded “only if the reparation measures were impossible or insufficient”.

However, the court ruled that the applicants were entitled to seek compensation in kind for the “ecological damage caused by France’s failure to comply with the targets it had set for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It said this needed further investigation and gave the state two months to respond.

It awarded each organisation a symbolic €1 for “moral prejudice”, saying the state’s failure to honour its climate commitments was “detrimental to the collective interest”.

Wednesday's judgment was hailed as "revolutionary" by the four NGOs – including Greenpeace France and Oxfam France – that lodged the formal complaint with the French prime minister's office in December 2018. When they received what they considered an inadequate response, they filed a legal case in March 2019.

The Paris agreement **signed five years ago** aimed to limit global warming to less than 2C above pre-industrial levels. Donald Trump **pulled the US** out of the deal in 2017, though Joe Biden plans to rejoin. Environmental experts say governments, including the French administration, have failed to meet their commitments.

The French government has pledged to reduce the country's greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2030 and reach carbon neutrality by 2050.

NGOs say the state is exceeding its carbon budgets and is not moving quickly enough to renovate buildings to make them energy efficient, or to develop renewable energy. They claim this is having a serious impact on the daily quality of life and health of people in France.

In a report last July, France's High Council for the Climate severely criticised government policies. "Climate action is not up to the challenges and objectives," it said.

France's greenhouse gas emission dropped by 0.9% in 2018-19, when the annual drop needed to reach its targets is 1.5% until 2025 and 3.2% afterwards.

In a written defence, the French government rejected accusations of inaction and asked the court to throw out any claim for compensation. It argued that the state could not be held uniquely responsible for climate change when it was not responsible for all global emissions.