**Rep. Ro Khanna on CA Flooding, Big Oil’s Climate Denial, Debt Ceiling, Assange & Possible Senate Bid**

JANUARY 17, 2023

Democracy Now

The death toll from two weeks of flooding in California has reached at least 20. As climate scientists are predicting more extreme weather linked to climate change over the next two years, outrage is growing over how fossil fuel companies were fully aware of the link between fossil fuel emissions and global warming but spent decades obscuring the science in order to make maximum profits. We speak with Democratic California Congressmember Ro Khanna, who recently concluded a congressional investigation into the allegations and says the oil industry needs to be held accountable for the damage it has wrought. Khanna also discusses the looming fight over raising the federal debt ceiling, the refugee crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, espionage charges against Julian Assange, charges Biden faces of having classified documents at his home, calls for Republican George Santos to resign and more.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We begin today’s show in California, where the death toll from two weeks of heavy storms and flooding has reached at least 20, as record rainfall, flooding and snow continued over the weekend. The director of California’s Governor’s Office of Emergency Services called the storm “among the most deadly natural disasters in the modern history of our state.”

President Biden has approved a major disaster recovery declaration for the state and plans to visit part of California’s Central Coast Thursday.

Climate scientists are predicting the world will see record heat waves over the next two years due to a combination of climate change and El Niño, a natural climate cycle that drives global temperatures higher. Climate scientist James Hansen and his colleagues recently said, quote, “We suggest that 2024 is likely to be off the chart as the warmest year on record.”

This comes as a recent [study](https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abk0063) in the journal *Science* confirmed ExxonMobil was fully aware of the link between fossil fuel emissions and global heating but spent decades refuting and obscuring the science in order to make maximum profits.

Our next guest is California Congressmember Ro Khanna. He spent nearly two years investigating Exxon and three other major fossil fuel companies for their misinformation campaigns about climate change.

**REP. RO KHANNA:** As early as the 1970s, Exxon knew not only that climate change is real, but that its products, Exxon’s products, were contributing to the climate crisis.

**AMY GOODMAN:** At the end of the congressional term in December, the House Oversight and Reform Committee issued a report along with more than 1,000 pages of documents showing how ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, BP and American Petroleum Institute and U.S. Chamber of Commerce hid their role in global warming by misleading the public about climate change. Now the incoming Senate Budget Committee, chaired by Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, is expected to pick up the investigation.

Congressmember Ro Khanna, Democrat of California and deputy whip of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, joins us now from Washington, D.C.

Congressmember, welcome back to *Democracy Now!* We’re speaking to you in a very different political landscape. Speaking of landscapes, what’s happening in your home state is, to say the least, chilling, as the world warms. Can you talk about the connection, which a lot of the media, though they focus a lot on California and what’s happening, does not talk about climate change? You focused a whole hearing on climate change and came out with a report. Make the connection.

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, Amy, first of all, thank you for bringing it up.

It has been devastating. I mean, I was reading about a 5-year-old boy who was with his mother. Flooding overwhelmed them, and the 5-year-old boy was separated and has not been found. In my district, fortunately, we haven’t been hardest hit, but when I was back, the roads are still flush with water. Driving conditions are very unsafe. And it has certainly been a challenge for residents.

The reality is that we are seeing this extreme weather because of a higher heat, because of a higher pressure, and it’s directly linked to the burning of fossil fuels, that have changed the climate.

The report I give, the investigation that I led as chair of the Environment Subcommittee, basically found that Exxon, Chevron and other Big Oil companies knew that when they were burning fossil fuels in the 1970s, it was causing climate change and that this was going to be a major problem for humanity. They had the best scientists. And yet their CEOs, their executives went out for decades and lied to the American public, did not disclose their own science. As a result, we never started the transition, and we are in the world of pain that we are in today.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And, Congressman, I wanted to ask you: Given the fact that we’re going to have a split control of the Congress now, with Democrats in control of the Senate and Republicans in control of the House, your expectations of what can be achieved legislatively in terms of the climate crisis?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Unfortunately, I don’t think much. You still have so many climate deniers on the Republican side. Even those who acknowledge that climate change is real are not willing to make the investments in renewables that are necessary, to make the investments in energy efficiency that are necessary. What the right often does is mock those of us who care about climate.

So we have two avenues. One, Amy mentioned in the preview, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse is going to be chair of the Senate Budget Committee. My hope and expectation is that he will continue a lot of the work we did when we were in the majority from the Oversight Committee. And then, the White House also has the power to investigate an executive action where they can make progress.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And I wanted to ask you also about another looming threat: the debt ceiling crisis. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen notified Congress that the U.S. will reach its statutory debt limit this Thursday. What does that mean exactly? And what do you expect to be able to happen, especially given the tenuous control that House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has on his own Republican majority?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** This is one of the most important questions facing the Congress. It is important for people watching to understand this is debt that the United States already owes. We’re not debating how much should we spend in the future. This is obligations that the United States government has. I believe that in this country we should pay our debts. And this should not even be a debate.

The consequences of not doing that will be spiking interest rates at a time where the economy already is vulnerable. The consequences will mean that some Medicare checks, Social Security checks, food stamp checks will not go out.

So, if push comes to shove, I believe the administration should act within their own power, such as increasing the interest rate on bonds to be able to raise revenue. There are other avenues. But really, the Congress should do its simple task of paying past debts.

**AMY GOODMAN:** But we’re not seeing that going in that direction. I mean, isn’t that what the conservative Republicans and a number of Democrats actually want, is to go after Social Security, to go after Medicare, to privatize, and this will be used as a way to do that?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Yes, this is what the Freedom Caucus wants. Of course, the consequence of that is also a massive default of the U.S. economy and higher interest rates, probably a severe recession, and jolting the global economy. But they don’t care. They don’t care about breaking the institutions, breaking the economy.

You know, if this was just a debate about Social Security spending, I’m for increasing the spending. I’m for John Larson’s act, that would actually increase benefits and not tax some of the benefits of Social Security for working-class families. We can have that debate, and they can say why they want to cut spending.

But what they’re doing is saying they want to hijack the entire U.S. economy, subject it to collapse, in order to get their goals. And it’s going to be an ugly debate. And frankly, Kevin McCarthy is going to be in a very difficult position, because they may threaten his speakership if he does what’s right for the country.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Speaking of paying debts, I wanted to go back to the issue of climate for a minute and what you found. It’s about holding these corporations accountable to the tune of billions of dollars, which could be some of the financing of how we deal with climate adaptation. A recent AP [piece](https://apnews.com/article/science-exxon-mobil-corp-new-jersey-business-climate-and-environment-e9594dc9adb504a81ec82f4ac2b72ef9) said, “Exxon Mobil’s scientists were remarkably accurate in their predictions about global warming, even as the company made public statements that contradicted its own scientists’ conclusions.” And, of course, the amount of money these oil companies made. What have you recommended in this report, that just came out before the beginning of the year, to actually hold these companies accountable? And would it be criminal accountability, as well as financial accountability?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, they should be held accountable like Big Tobacco was held accountable. At the very least, Congress should pass financial accountability. One concrete place would be to prevent the methane leaks that are taking place in many oil wells, to seal them up, the ones that aren’t being used, to seal up, so that we don’t have such increase in methane leaks, that are one of the biggest causes of further climate change.

The reality of what we discovered — and we have documents for that — is that these oil companies, like Big Tobacco, lied to the American public, they lied for decades, and they’re continuing to lie. When they say that they are for the Paris accords, when they say that they’re for climate goals now, that’s actually just cover for what the documents show is, quote, “a license to operate,” to increase their fossil fuel infrastructure. So, they’re actually not taking significant steps to lower emissions. They’re using that rhetoric while making very small investments in clean tech and actually making massive investments in increasing fossil fuel infrastructure, increasing carbon emissions. So the pattern of deception continues.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Congressman, I’d like to ask you about an unusual, I guess, bipartisan effort to boost U.S. manufacturing that you’re involved with, with Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, the National Development and Strategy Coordination Act. Could you talk about that and why you joined with Senator Rubio?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, our country has made a colossal mistake. With NAFTA, with the World Trade Organization, we basically sent over 70,000 factory jobs either offshore or those factories got shuttered. We lost the means, the capability of producing things in this country. It’s led to social discord. It’s led to the gutting of communities. I believe we need a renewal of industry, of factories in America. And I believe we do that with the federal government partnering with business to revitalize places that have been left out. That is what this bill is about. It’s based on Hamilton and what FDR did, that FDR famously — with the War Production Board and the federal reconstruction organization, that really helped build the industry for America.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And I wanted to ask you also about the change in Democratic leadership in the House. Clearly, the group of leaders, including Nancy Pelosi, who were all over 80 years old have stepped down from their leadership posts. We have a new generation with Hakeem Jeffries and other key House leaders. Your sense of what this generational change is going to do in terms of Democratic tactics and strategy in the House?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** There’s an excitement with new generation leaders. There’s more unity in the caucus than I’ve ever seen. I think Leader Jeffries and Whip Clark are off to a very strong start. They are helping make sure that the Democratic Caucus is united around our goals, and they’re taking the fight to the Republicans. So, it’s been a very good two weeks for the Democratic Caucus.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Congressmember Ro Khanna, if you can talk about what you believe should happen with Congressman Santos? I mean, it’s almost become a joke now, except it’s so significant and involves the balance of Congress. I mean, the latest news that George Santos’s aide impersonated the chief of staff of Kevin McCarthy; McCarthy admitting they knew that there were problems with Santos going way back — of course, it’s going to come out more; just lying about almost everything, not even clear what the guy’s name is; the Republican leadership of Long Island, where he comes from, calling for him to resign. Of course, Kevin McCarthy is dependent on his vote. What do you think should happen?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, he should resign. It’s obvious. I mean, I don’t know any other job in America where you can go in, lie about your education, lie about your past employment, lie about your background, and then stay in the job. You’d be fired one week later. You’d be asked to leave. So, why is Congress different? Why can someone tell every single lie in a prospective job interview, which is what an election is, and continue to serve? This is, in my view, common sense. He should resign. Every Republican leader should be calling on him to resign.

**AMY GOODMAN:** But the House wants to defund the Ethics Committee. That’s one place where they could sanction him. How do you actually make this happen?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, they not only want to defund the Office of Congressional Ethics; unfortunately, the rule they passed really guts it. They got rid of three of the four Democratic board members because of term limits. And they have made it very hard for the Office of Congressional Ethics to hire people. It was one of the most shameful parts of their rule package.

Remember, this is an Office of Congressional Ethics that came about after the Abramoff scandals and has been pretty bipartisan and fact-based. They’ve gone after about 50 Democrats, 50 Republicans. So, they are lessening ethics standards in this country. So much for draining the swamp.

And the reality is, the House Ethics Committee can still investigate Santos, but, as you know, those things can drag on. And there has to be far more effort by leadership to get him to resign. When leadership wants that to happen, they can make it happen. They’re choosing not to, because they want his vote in a closely divided House.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And, Congressman, I wanted to ask you about the continuing crisis at the border, how the Biden administration is handling it. You saw the report that we had of Mayor Eric Adams of New York City traveling to the border because of the enormous number of asylum refugees who have been sent by Texas to New York City. You introduced a resolution recently calling on the U.S. to acknowledge its complicity in El Salvador’s humanitarian crisis. Could you talk about what the Biden administration is doing and what you think should be done?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, in my view, this is a, again, commonsense issue. Of course we need to secure our border, but we also need to make sure that every person has the right to file for asylum, and to make sure that that asylum case is heard. That requires resources. That requires Congress to act, to fund the judges, to fund the asylum offices that can hear these cases. And in the case of people fleeing actual violence, we have a legal duty, a moral duty, to make sure that we are a country that accepts asylum. Of course, we don’t want people coming with fraudulent claims, but that can only be adjudicated if we beef up the asylum office. And that is what the president has asked Congress to do.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Following up on that, you recently tweeted, “The U.S. has never fully recognized its role in perpetuating El Salvador’s civil war. I introduced a resolution today calling for the U.S. to support humanitarian aid and violence prevention for El Salvador and extend TPS for Salvadorans in America today.” I wanted to ask you about that and a related question.

We all know that the new House is saying that they’re going to investigate the intelligence committees. You had Kinzinger and Cheney on the January 6th committee, Republicans regretting their limited role. Now they want to investigate that committee and intelligence. But progressives have long called for investigating intelligence committees. I mean, you had the Church Committee hearings of the 1970s. Is there a way — and you’re a master of working with the other side, also investigating what happened with Julian Assange and the question of what should happen to him, a number of people calling for just simply the charges to be dropped. Is there some way of investigating the intelligence community from a progressive perspective?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Amy, unfortunately, I don’t think in the current committee. I mean, the current committee is no Church Committee. The Church Committee, of course, did extraordinary work in [uncovering] a role that the United States agencies may have played in undermining democracy in other parts of the world. And in El Salvador, as you’re well aware of the history, unfortunately, we provided significant support to the El Salvadorian military, to some of the death squads, that exacerbated the civil war. And we have never acknowledged our role there.

If this committee were looking at overreaches of American foreign policy, I would happily have supported it. My fear is, and the fear of many of my Democratic colleagues, that the committee is going to go after the investigators of Donald Trump, that they’re going to be highly partisan in their approach. And that, I don’t think, serves any productive purpose.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And let me ask you about Julian Assange. There’s going to be a [tribunal](https://www.democracynow.org/live/coming_up_on_jan_20_belmarsh) at the end of the week at the National Press Club. Many major news organizations are calling for the Biden administration to drop the charges against him. He faces 175 years in prison in the United States, if extradited, tried and found guilty. *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *El País*, *Der Spiegel* have called for these charges to be dropped, that freedom of the press is at stake. Do you join in that call?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, I have said that there’s a reason President Obama never brought charges against Assange. Whatever you think of his moral actions — and I have not defended those — I do not believe that you can bring charges against someone simply for publishing information. If there were actual evidence that Assange himself had deliberately sought and gathered classified information through illegal means, then that is different. But if the charges are based simply on his receiving this information and publishing it, that, in my view, affects the entire concept of freedom of press and has a chilling effect on publishers. And I have said that that is overbroad.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And, Congressman, I wanted to ask you — one of your colleagues, the progressive Congressmember Katie Porter, has announced her bid for the U.S. Senate in 2024, as many expect Senator Feinstein to retire at the end of her current term, after serving for more than three decades. I’m wondering your thoughts about that. Any thought yourself given to running for the Senate, and also other potential candidates for that seat?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, as you know, I was a co-chair for Bernie Sanders, and I’ve been flattered that many of his delegates and supporters have reached out to me. But what I have said is what I said six years ago. I had encouraged Barbara Lee to enter the race actually against Dianne Feinstein. And I said that I’m going to weigh very significantly what Barbara Lee, my neighbor, decides to do. She has been a very strong antiwar voice in the Congress. But I’ve been flattered that people want me to serve, and I love serving in the Congress.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, are you thinking of running for Senate or for president?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Certainly not president. I’m going to be supporting Joe Biden. If he didn’t run, I’d support Bernie Sanders. In terms of the Senate, I have said that I’m going to look at it, but I do want to see what Barbara Lee does. And I know that she’s going to be making a decision in the next few months, as well. We just went through an election. There will be the next three, four months to sort it out.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And finally, I wanted to ask you about another piece of legislation, that you’ve joined forces with Senator Padilla on the PEACE Act to change federal standard for the use of force by federal officers, to require that force be used only when necessary to prevent imminent death or serious bodily injury. The prospects for that legislation and why you decided to join with Senator Padilla on it?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** I’ve been pushing this for years, the idea that our force — use-of-force standard should not just be what is reasonable, but should be the standard of force used in almost every other Western liberal democracy, and that is that force can only be applied when it is absolutely necessary and a last resort. That would reduce many of the police killings of unarmed Black and Brown men in this country. It would actually, in my view, put officers at less risk. The difference is stark. Under a reasonable standard, if an officer thinks someone is going for a gun or thinks it’s appropriate to use force, they can. In a last resort scenario, the officer cannot use force unless they actually have their life threatened or someone else’s life threatened. And we should move to the standard that so many other countries have. That’s what the PEACE Act is all about.

**AMY GOODMAN:** As we wrap up, the question of documents. What has just overwhelmed the news cycle over the weekend is the revelations of President Biden having classified documents. Of course, the comparisons — though the numbers don’t compare, at least what we know at this point — to Donald Trump, but having classified documents at his home, in his garage, at the Penn Biden Center. I want to ask you if — what you think should happen in this case. Did you support the attorney general appointing a special counsel immediately to investigate this? And if it raises overall questions about the massive overclassification of documents in Washington, the millions of people who have access to them and the millions of documents that are classified?

**REP. RO KHANNA:** Well, I certainly think there is overclassification. I’ve often said to folks, when I go into the SCIF and read classified documents, I’m almost surprised that I am learning things that one could have just read in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* or on *Democracy Now!*

But the point is that we do have to treat classified information very seriously, very securely. I’ve never, in the SCIF, been able to take a document out of that room. And that’s a good procedure. I don’t understand why we can’t have that in every branch of government: Don’t allow classified documents to leave the premises. Don’t allow people to take them to their private residences or put them in some presidential center. It seems that’s just a recipe for a problem. So, I hope there will be holistic reform.

But the key difference, as you started with, Amy, is not just the numbers of documents; it’s how President Biden handled this. His attorneys reported to the Justice Department on day one, when they discovered these documents. In stark contrast, President Trump refused to cooperate, defied subpoenas, defied law enforcement.

And I have trust in Merrick Garland’s integrity, so I think his decision to appoint a special counsel is appropriate. As long as that special counsel is appropriately circumscribed, it doesn’t turn into some kind of witch hunt, as independent counsels often do.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Well, we want to thank you very much, Congressmember Ro Khanna, Democratic congressmember of California, deputy whip of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.