

Observations at the COP-21 UN Summit on Climate

Report 04

Global Climate Change and the Plight of the People of the Pacific Islands of Tuvalu and Kiribati

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by
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President Anote Tong of Kiribati together with Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga of the Pacific Island of Tuvalu convened a gathering today on this second day of the COP to present the plight of their island nations.



Before a standing room only crowd, they related how their island nations are already experiencing acute consequences of climate disruption. President Tong sees his nation being squeezed out of its traditional home islands by the massive climate changes now taking place in the Central Pacific. Residents are worried and many are already leaving the islands – currently at a rate of 75 residents per week. Most are going either to the Solomon Islands, especially to the Island of Guadalcanal, or to New Zealand. But when they arrive, they are seen as refugees and there is little good arable land on which to live.

They say that unless those of us in the developed world can keep the average world temperature increase to within 1.5 degrees C, they will not be able to survive in their present location. They are searching for new solutions. For instance, they are speculating that it might be possible to try building floating islands big enough to hold up to 30,000 people. Island leaders are

already in consultation with Japanese engineers and others from The Netherlands as they explore options.

Already with a current sea rise of about one foot, they are assaulted by increasingly larger storm surges and experiencing waves wreaking havoc on homes. Sea walls are breaking down and this is causing inland flooding. For the first time this past year during a storm, a wave reached half way across the island of Tuvalu. Their condition is dire as they already are experiencing more intense typhoons, far in excess of the historical norm.

New weather patterns are also emerging. The Fiji Islands have also been under an intense and unprecedented drought. This has devastated the taro crop which is the major food staple.

New diseases are appearing, such as dengue fever and Zika - both of which Hawaii is also experiencing.

Ocean acidification is already causing a reduction in shellfish and other crustaceans at the bottom of the food chain. Coral reefs are dying as about 35% of CO₂ in the atmosphere is being eroded and metabolized in the oceans. As CO₂ goes into sea water, carbonic acid is created which dissolves coral. (As a test, one can take beach sand made from coral, and add a small amount vinegar and watch sand disappear as most of is not rock but coral.) As CO₂ levels continue to rise, coral beaches will melt away. As beaches melt away, tourist income will disappear.

“These conditions are no joke,” said President Tong. He was sad and disappointed that some Americans still debated climate change. He was disgusted that leaders from industrialized countries complain that too much action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions might throw the economy into recession. “What a pity!” he exclaimed. “For us this is life and death! Our very survival is at stake and you worry about maintaining comforts and business as usual. What are we to do?” he asked.

He said that we know that an accelerating polar ice melt will have implications for our lives in the Central Pacific. "You should keep in mind that what we are experiencing now, these conditions for which we are on the front lines, they will soon come to you."

Then he moved to questions surrounding forced migration. U.S. President Obama said [during the Opening Day programs] that America historically has been the largest emitter of greenhouse gases. “Our island is feeling the consequences of your pollution of the atmosphere [with CO₂]. You have some liability for our predicament. What will you do? We want to stay in our traditional homes and live within our traditional culture. If we are forced to leave, will you help us to ‘migrate with dignity’?”

Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga of Tuvalu added his insights: “We won't survive without legally binding international agreements. We are here at COP21 to protect and preserve our island nations. Nothing less than 1.5 degree C will suffice.” But already around the world we have 1 Degree C of average temperature increase. For our protection we need “loss and damage protection” in any agreement. You should realize that we are here fighting for our survival as a people.



What is not happening is “a global approach to this climate catastrophe.” Each country is protecting its own interests and not looking at the whole picture of changes – all around the world.

“Your timidity,” he said, “to cut deep [into carbon emissions] in the industrial countries will cause us to die. The flooding of our islands and even our deaths will be upon you.”

As a concluding perspective, Prime Minister Sopoaga said, “if we can save Tuvalu and Kiribati, then maybe we can save the world from the traumas and damages yet to happen.”

What became clear from this presentation from leaders of the Pacific Islands is that most of the stories of climate havoc are coming from people who live in the tropics. They tell of how climate chaos is coming upon their lives and causing havoc and great damage.

In Brazil, for instance, the Native people in the Amazon say that rain is becoming more intense during the rainy season, but during the dry season it is now hotter and drier. The extremes of possibility are being stretched.

In tropical Africa new levels of drought are causing crops to fail. This causes food shortages and starvation on the horizon.

As a concluding issue, Prime Minister Sopoaga asked, “Why don’t you in your media report these stories?” And “How can you still be debating what is clear and obvious? You can do detailed reporting of war stories and violence, but you do not speak of these climate problems which are part of your contribution to the world.”

As part of a closing appeal by President Tong was on the need for us all to work together and to look at the whole world and not just at those issues which impact our own countries.

Because Kiribati is actually a chain of islands, President Tong wants to build a stout sea wall and fortify at least one island in the chain so the country’s physical presence doesn’t disappear entirely. He has been discussing ways to hold off the sea rise with Dutch and Japanese engineers and says that the technology exists to experiment with floating islands.

Despite the attention his country’s plight has received, Tong doesn’t like to linger on the topic of future flooding and relocation. Instead he emphasizes the damage caused by the policies of Australia and other developed countries that have emitted carbon dioxide into the atmosphere that is endangering the very existence of Kiribati. For perspective, he points out that the average resident on these islands emits less than 1 ton of carbon dioxide each year – about 7% of the global average per person.

“Climate change is not an issue that respects national borders or state sovereignty,” he said. This is why this problem is really a global issue. But without a global vision, he concluded, "we will not come to an adequate agreement on climate change."