

Tuvalu demands cuts to maintain its existence

By: Paula Scheidt Manoel on December 18th, 2009

When I ask Fiu Mata'esse Elisara'Laulu how his country, Samoa, would suffer with climate change, the answer comes rapidly: "Do you have the whole day for us to talk about it?"

Elisara'Laulu a representative of people from Pacific Ocean countries, or the 'liquid continent' as he calls it, are at high risk of being hit by climate change.

These countries do not have big delegation offices at the UN Climate Change Conference. In comparison the United States has three large rooms. But this doesn't make such a difference when it comes to negotiations. Being rich and big or small and poor, every country that is a party under the Climate Change Convention has the power of veto. And it takes just one 'no' to stop the climate game.

With the latest climate change predictions, Samoans now worry about their own existence. The increase in the number of cyclones and sea level rise are the main treats to these countries. Elisara'Laulu said that studies by the National Institute of Atmospheric and Water Research of New Zealand shows that the Pacific is hit by around nine cyclones annually. "You just need one cyclone to devastate your economy", says Elisara'Laulu, director of the first NGO of Samoa, Ole Siosiomaga Society (OLSSI).

According to him, 76% of the Samoan population lives on the coast and most of the infrastructure is near the sea. "Until 1990, the frequency of cyclones was one to every 100 years. In 1991 we were hit by one and then another the following year."

Protests on Wednesday 9 December came from just one small island country in the Pacific – Tuvalu. The corridors were packed with supporters asking for more ambitious emissions cuts. Inside the talks the Tuvaluan delegation was asking for sufficient reductions to guarantee that maximum greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere do not exceed 350 parts per million (ppm). This would keep the temperature rise to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius. Many other countries aim only to keep temperature rises below 2 degrees.

Such an ambitious target would require cuts not just from rich countries, but developing ones too. But, nations as China, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and India were against the proposal.

The result of it was the suspension of the negotiations, in the words of the executive-secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Yvo de Boer, talks “were suspended to lunch”