

Interview: CLIMATE CHANGE...NOBODY IS IMMUNE

ANOTE TONG President of Kiribati

Duncan Wilson



At the World Environment Conference in New Zealand in June, Kiribati President Anote Tong secured a migration plan for his people, should rising tides overwhelm the islands.

He outlined this assurance to ISLANDS BUSINESS and also spoke of his concerns with tuna practices in the region and the politics of Fiji and China.

ISLANDS BUSINESS spoke with President Tong when he was in New Zealand recently.

You're in Wellington for the United Nation's World Environment Day, which is suppose to encourage a move towards a low carbon economy. Our carbon emissions are already very low compared to most other countries, so how can we realistically contribute to a reduction in global warming? Don't you need more of the larger countries on board?

“We're the victims; for our islands, destiny is irreversible. We will be impacted in a large way, either totally submerged or, within time, totally uninhabitable. And so we are first on the line. The real issue is that if nothing is done, there will be other Pacific countries on the line, and if nothing more is done, then there will be other countries on the line, not simply from rising sea levels but also from other climatic phenomena. The United States' Hurricane Katrina in 2005 for example, is an issue for the US, with thousands of lives lost and billions and billions of dollars worth of damage. The typhoons that are coming over the US, the bush fires that are in Australia, the droughts; much of this is an effect of global warming in different forms. Nobody is immune to this.”

You've long been concerned with such issues, but do other i-Kiribati share your views? And how does your county come to terms with what you describe as the end of your homeland?

“As a leader it has been very difficult, because what do we say to our people? We're a highly Christian community, and so up until now the response has been a process of denial, citizens refuse to accept it. The typical response has been the same—'who are you to say this? God created this land and God is not going to do this to us.' But recently,

there has been an awakening, a realisation, because of the strong community action on this; a group of church leaders mobilised the people, and there were marches to government, for example. Essentially, it was a challenge to government. People were asking, 'Why is this happening? What is government doing?' I was happy to say that we had been dealing with the issue. But we saw no point in alarming them unduly over something that they cannot do anything about. When we explained that we had already embarked on certain programmes, it at least gave them a glimmer of hope because you can understand the despair of an oncoming tide. But we are trying to create hope and I must say that it took us a long time to try and find solutions to this. But these solutions will not be realised without the participation by other countries."

One of these solutions you've sought has been an undertaking that New Zealand and other countries would be a site for migration, when rising tides overwhelm your islands. What commitments have you secured during this visit in Wellington?

"I've applauded New Zealand on the Pacific Access Category scheme. This is wonderful, it's human, it's highly human, and we're hoping that other countries will follow suit. But I think it doesn't solve the problem, which will be of such a vast environmental scale. What we would like to do is to offer to New Zealand, to any other country, our people who are highly trained, skilled, and who will make a contribution to their new country. So we're asking for assistance in addition to the Pacific Access Category scheme. Hopefully, it will be possible for our own people with qualifications to apply directly to that country and be accepted. I also think now that with the situation we're in, perhaps more consideration should be given to the migration process. We want to begin that now, and do it over the next twenty, thirty or forty years, rather than merely, in fifty to sixty years time, simply come looking for somewhere to settle our one hundred thousand people because they can no longer live in Kiribati, because they will either be dead or drown. We begin the process now, it's a win-win for all and very painless, but I think if we come as refugees, in fifty to sixty years time, I think they would become a football to be kicked around."

And is the New Zealand Government wholly receptive to this?

"I think the New Zealand government has been very receptive, they have come forward on many things. On migration issues, they have come forward very positively, we cannot ask for more. That was a test—if it works well, maybe there will be room for more. I think the quota is fine but the quota must not be based on population, it must be based on suitability and need. If I'm very happy on a high rise paradise island in the Pacific, there is no point in me leaving, I don't need to come, I can live there for the next millennia. If I'm sinking and they say 'You wait for your quota' then that would be ridiculous."

Fiji also featured in your discussions with New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, she's said Bainimarama's commitments 'seem to be observed more in breach than anything else,' and has called for Forum unity on the issue. Your response?

"I think the situation in Fiji is very unfortunate. If the commander was really giving the

electoral commitments, he says, he is, I think we would applaud him. But to look at it, there is no chance, I think, that at some time soon there will be a return to democracy. The pressure, of course, has been for the elections to be held in March 2009. In the Pacific Islands, we tend to look at things in a more relaxed fashion. Now there is a demand for that schedule to be met. We would love to have that schedule, but we also have to face reality—and it is important that we now continue the dialogue. I think the last thing we would want to do is for Fiji to go away isolated, left on their own with no one to talk to, and the rest of us unable to assist in any way. I for one am advocating that we must continue the dialogue, especially at the Forum, because that is one link that Fiji continues to have with the international community. We're a Pacific nation too, and in a regional organisation, we feel the same things, we believe we understand each other. We don't accept all of what others may do, but I believe that we must continue to engage with Fiji, rather than cast off all ties."

Do you share other countries' concern at China's growing engagement with Fiji, especially given your nation's tussle with that superpower?

"China is a country with a very aggressive foreign policy. If you look around, China is virtually the only power with an office in almost every Pacific Islands country, even more than the United States. I think that's got to be looked at with proper analysis. One has got to understand the reasons for that and I think we're talking about global politics here, power politics. I'm sure China has their own agenda, we have our own agenda as well. As I have always explained, we would like to be friends with everybody, we're in no position to influence any country in the Pacific, we're too small. But China continues to have an embassy in Kiribati and we have no problem with that."

Turning from the political climate to another environmental issue: tuna resources. How concerned are you by reported overfishing in the region?

"We've licensed a number of nationalities. They need to understand more of what we do, our practices in the region, so we're working on that. We will continue to insist on the terms and conditions that apply in the region, and are applied to all nationalities. This concern is well justified, given the experience of distant water fishing nations with their own fisheries, which have been wiped out. We have to watch them, we scrutinise them rather closely. We're really concerned, tuna is the last resource we have, so for us it's more important than anything else."

How effective is current surveillance and the vessel monitoring systems? Is it ensuring sustainability?

"We would be one of the first to say that it is not the case. We have such a large exclusive economic zone, we cannot police it adequately. We're grateful because we get assistance on this from New Zealand and Australia, and the French are also coming in, and maybe even our close neighbors. So surveillance is an issue."

How do you intend to reform fishing in Kiribati, so that your own country can

better benefit from the industry?

“It’s not so much about increasing the access fee, but I’ll go on the record as saying that I would personally like a cartel-type operation. This is the last major tuna resource in the world, and given the world is in the grip of a food shortage, I’m sure we should be getting a little more for our tuna than we do now. Tuna is good protein, very nutritious and healthy. I look forward to the day when we will harvest, we will process, and we will sell. It’s been very difficult for us, the way the markets are controlled.

But yes, fishing contributes to our revenue, and we hope it will be able to contribute even more. There are schemes under consideration for making this happen and I think it will eliminate much of the concerns with what is currently in place. What is more likely to happen in the short-term is that those fishing boats, regardless of nationality, that want to fish here, they will pay a higher price and so those that do not want to pay that price will be eliminated. I think that’s the way to do it. I don’t think it’s fair for someone to say ‘I’m your friend, I will pay less,’ I think we all pay because it’s a marketplace.”