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## Pacific Politics

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# The Sharp End of Climate Change

By Nic Maclellan



The threat of extinction has island nations demanding stronger climate action. But Kevin Rudd will be trying to ignore them at the upcoming Pacific Islands Forum, writes Nic Maclellan.

When he spoke before the UN General Assembly this week, Palau's representative had this to say:

"We do not carelessly call climate change a security threat. When we are told by scientists to prepare for a humanitarian crisis, including exodus, in our lifetimes, how can it be different from preparing for a threat like war?"

For some time, people from low-lying atoll nations in the Pacific have expressed the view that climate change is a greater threat to national security than terrorism. In 2007, Pacific representatives at the United Nations submitted a draft resolution to the 62nd Session of the UN General Assembly, requesting that the Security Council consider the security implications of climate change.

On 3 June 2009, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution titled "Climate Change and its Possible Security Implications". The resolution, proposed by Pacific island governments, calls on the UN Security Council and relevant UN agencies to investigate the issue.

It's a case that demonstrates how those countries with the most to lose from climate change are among those with the least power to push for movement on the issue. The central deals in Copenhagen in December will be struck by major industrialised powers like the United States, China, India and the European Union. With the exception of Papua

New Guinea's key role in debates over deforestation and carbon sinks, individual island states from the Pacific, Caribbean and Indian Ocean carry little weight on the global stage.

As the Copenhagen talks approach, however, voices from the Pacific are becoming louder. A group of highly climate-vulnerable island nations have banded together as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) to call for greater action on global warming. AOSIS has a membership of 43 states and observers drawn from all oceans and regions of the world. Accounting for over 20 per cent of the UN General Assembly membership, these small island developing states (SIDS) hope to amplify their diplomatic role on the international stage.

For Pacific countries, global warming has adverse effects on long-term development needs such as food and water security, the protection of fragile marine ecosystems and the reduction of public health threats like malaria and dengue fever. Stronger action at Copenhagen will be critical to their future.

As AOSIS argued at the December 2008 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change conference in Poznan, any eventual climate goal must include avoiding climate change impacts for small island states, and that means keeping temperature increases below 1.5°C.

According to AOSIS, "A 2°C increase compared to pre-industrial levels would have devastating consequences on SIDS due to resulting sea level rise, coral bleaching, coastal erosion, changing precipitation patterns, increased incidence and re-emergence of climate related diseases and the impacts of increasingly frequent and severe weather events."

The Vice-President of the Republic of Palau, Elias Camsek Chin, emphasized these factors in his address to the General Assembly last September, stating:

"Never before in all history has the disappearance of whole nations been such a real possibility. Palau and the members of the Pacific Islands Forum are deeply concerned about the growing threat which climate change poses not only to our sustainable development, but in fact, to our future survival. This is a security matter which has gone unaddressed."

The potential that a nation may cease to exist because of loss of territory from environmental causes (rather than war and conflict) raises new dilemmas in international humanitarian law. Scholars are starting to look at the implications of global warming for understandings of national sovereignty.

In their report *An Uncertain Future — Law Enforcement, National Security and Climate Change*, the UK-based Oxford Research Group has noted:

"Climate change-related issues have the potential to cause international legal disputes as the world map is redrawn. As coastlines retreat due to erosion and flooding, then

maritime borders and the associated exclusive economic zones might also have to change, as a country's ocean territory is legally determined by its land territory. Another possibility is that the evacuation or even physical disappearance of low-lying small island states — such as Tuvalu in the South Pacific — could result in challenges to sovereignty as the current qualifications defining the existence of a state include a permanent population and a defined territory."

The UN resolution passed this week calls on UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon to prepare a report for the General Assembly on the possible security implications of climate change and for UN agencies to investigate the issue. While the resolution is largely symbolic, without binding effect on the major powers, it does add weight to the calls by AOSIS for tougher emissions targets.

In order to limit sea level rises, AOSIS has argued that the long-term target as a stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentrations should be well below 350 ppm CO<sub>2e</sub> and temperature increases limited to below 1.5°C above the pre-industrial level. To meet this target, industrialized countries as a group would need to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by more than 40 per cent from 1990 levels by 2020, and more than 95 per cent by 2050.

These targets are obviously much tougher than Kevin Rudd's pledge of 5 to 15 per cent cuts by 2020. This is one reason why the Australian Government doesn't want climate change to be a central agenda item at the next meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum, to be hosted by Australia in Cairns in the first week of August.

Once again, Australia's domestic agenda will seek to override the interests of neighboring small island states. Island leaders have sharp memories of the 1997 Forum meeting in Rarotonga, when newly elected Prime Minister John Howard blocked the Forum consensus on taking a united regional position to the December 2007 UNFCCC conference in Kyoto — the meeting that developed the Kyoto Protocol which the Howard government refused to ratify.

With the Rudd Government struggling to gain support for its Emissions Trading Scheme as it seeks to develop a coherent policy for the Copenhagen negotiations, this latest UN General Assembly resolution is an uncomfortable reminder that our near neighbors are on the climate frontline.

Tuvalu Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia puts it succinctly:

"For a highly vulnerable country like Tuvalu, we cannot just sit back and watch our homeland slowly disappear. If necessary, we will use whatever legal means are available to seek the necessary restitution for all damages created by climate change. Hopefully, the international community will respond before such action is necessary. But time is running out fast."