

Australia, New Zealand reject stronger climate measures at Pacific Islands Forum

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The communiqué issued at the conclusion of this year's Pacific Islands Forum endorsed the position of Australia and New Zealand not to back a push by smaller island states for the rise in global temperatures to be limited to 1.5 degrees. This was despite a pro-forma acknowledgement that even an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels would "severely exacerbate the particular challenges facing the most vulnerable smaller island states of the Pacific."

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on Friday that the leaders had "failed to come to a common position" on climate change after nine hours of "tense" talks at the forum, held in Port Moresby on September 9–11. The Pacific states maintain that the current internationally agreed limit of 2 degrees, supported by Australia and New Zealand, will push many beyond their ability to adapt.

Kiribati President Anote Tong said the communiqué recognised that the islands "on the front line" of global warming were facing a serious problem and were in a "very different" position to Australia and New Zealand. "It's not the best outcome that we would have liked, but we have to respect that," Tong said. Kiribati, with its population of 110,000 spread across 33 low-lying islands, is particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) comprises the regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, and 14 Pacific nations; Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Some are micro-states with populations numbering in the thousands.

As has become the practice at recent forums, Washington sent a high-level "partner" delegation in

order to extend its efforts to counter China's influence in the region. It was headed by Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, Heather Higginbottom and included senior officials from the US Pacific Command, the U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The US State Department said the visit aimed to emphasize the "depth and breadth of US engagement with the Pacific." The high-level delegation, particularly the inclusion of military officials, makes clear that every country in the Indo-Pacific, no matter how small, comes under the purview of Washington's "pivot to Asia" and military build-up against China.

The forum was preceded by a two-day gathering of the Pacific Islands Development Forum in Fiji where the Pacific Island countries, meeting without Australia and New Zealand, agreed on a position to take to the UN climate change talks in Paris in November. The statement included a demand to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees, an international moratorium on coal mines and for countries to uphold the principle of "polluter pays."

Before the PIF, several Pacific leaders warned that anything short of a commitment to limit the average global temperature rise to 1.5 per cent would represent a "betrayal" of their people. "We expect [Australia and New Zealand] as bigger brothers, not bad brothers, to support us on this one because our future depends on it," Tong said. Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi declared; "you are not talking about small changes," but about "survivability." If climate change is not stopped, "a lot of the countries in the Pacific would just disappear," he said.

Evidence of the environmental catastrophe confronting humanity continues to mount. The 2 degree international target arose from an agreement between

governments in 2009 to focus on what was “realistic” rather than a scientific judgement on what was safe. In 2014 the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that substantial cuts in greenhouse gas emissions were needed immediately and had to be continued over decades to avert a potential disaster. It warned that without drastic changes to energy production, global temperatures would exceed the 2 degree target by 2030 and rise by 4 degrees by the end of the century.

Already countries in the South West Pacific are experiencing climate instability and extreme events. The devastation of Vanuatu by Cyclone Pam in March highlighted threats associated with increased cyclone severity in the Pacific. Flooding caused by huge spring tides in parts of Micronesia in late summer was blamed by locals on climate change, as were unseasonal storms still affecting parts of the region. At the same time, several countries are struggling with the worst drought in decades as this year’s El Niño weather pattern sets in. In Papua New Guinea’s highlands, dozens of deaths in recent weeks have been linked to food shortages caused by a prolonged drought and severe frosts.

Governments, however, continue to pursue the immediate national economic interests of their own ruling classes making an effective global climate change agreement impossible. The last UN climate summit, held in the Peruvian capital of Lima in December, concluded without agreement on reducing global carbon emissions, another in the long list of failed UN summits.

At the PIF, the New Zealand and Australian prime ministers, John Key and Tony Abbott, declared flatly that neither country was prepared to make any new commitments on climate change. Abbott said Australia and New Zealand “have already announced very ambitious targets for emissions reduction to take to the Paris conference.” The claim is completely fraudulent. According to economist Frank Jotzo from the Australian National University, even if in the unlikely event that current targets were implemented, Australia will remain the highest per capita emitter in the developed world.

Key tried to shift the blame to China, India and the United States. He told reporters; “A lot of these (Pacific) countries have a relationship with China, so one of the points we’ll be making is: you know them

well, you take aid from them, it’s a good chance to talk to them about their climate change position as well.”

Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, who was expelled by the forum between 2009 and 2014, following the 2006 military coup, boycotted this year’s gathering citing “the refusal of Australia and New Zealand to step back and allow the Pacific island nations to determine their own futures free from outside interference.” “We have significant differences with Australia over its policies on climate change, in particular, that are clearly not in the interests of the Pacific Small Island Developing States,” Bainimarama said.

Following the forum, Australian Immigration Minister Peter Dutton was overheard joking to Abbott about rising seas that will swamp low-lying Pacific islands, saying “time doesn’t mean anything when you’re about to ... have water lapping at your door.” Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum denounced Dutton, saying “insensitivity knows no bounds in the big polluting island down [south].” “Next time waves are battering my home [and] my grandkids are scared, I’ll ask Peter Dutton to come over, and we’ll see if he is still laughing,” he wrote.

Dutton’s remarks simply underscore the contempt of the two imperialist powers towards the peoples of the Pacific, a region both have long regarded as their sphere of influence.



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