# Pacific Island nations “bearing the brunt” of climate change

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Pacific Island nations have told the COP21 ecological summit in Paris they are “bearing the brunt” of the effects of climate change. Some, such as Tuvalu, are less than four metres above sea level and face an existential threat due to rising seas. Pacific leaders called on the advanced nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to keep global warming rises below 1.5 degrees centigrade, which scientists say is safer than the current agreed goal of 2C.

Chairing the final COP21 leaders’ session last Tuesday, Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama issued what he said was an “SOS call to the world” and asked global leaders to visit the Pacific to experience the “reality of climate change.”

Rising sea levels and extreme weather events were already beginning to destroy the Pacific Islands and their way of life, Bainimarama said. Without reducing the carbon emissions of the industrialised nations, the world was about to “blunder into an age of soaring temperatures, searing droughts, punishing storms and vast areas of the world submerged,” he asserted.

Bainimarama warned that “a whole new category of the dispossessed—climate refugees” was emerging, with the peoples of “entire nations, in some cases, having to find new homes.” The crisis included the loss of three low-lying Pacific nations—Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands—which “will simply slip beneath the waves altogether.”

Fiji has already begun relocating 45 coastal communities and so far identified 830 that are at risk. It is also dealing with the re-emergence of climate-influenced diseases such as typhoid, dengue fever, leptospirosis and diarrhoeal illnesses. Last year, a dengue outbreak in Fiji infected 20,000 people.

The devastation of Vanuatu by Cyclone Pam in March highlighted threats associated with increased cyclone severity. Several countries, including Papua New Guinea, are struggling with the worst drought in decades.

Bainimarama, a former military head and leader of the 2006 coup, blamed the industrialised nations for the high carbon emissions. Fiji’s own carbon emissions are a minute proportion of the global output—0.04 percent. “My message” he declared, “is that the industrialised world has a moral obligation to make the change.”

Bainimarama’s sentiments were echoed by other Pacific Island leaders. Marshall Islands President Christopher Loeak noted that he was speaking as a representative of a nation “that lies just two metres above sea level. Everything I know and everyone I love is in the hands of us gathered here today.” Nauru President Baron Waqa said island communities were paying in droughts, record cyclones and eroding shorelines.

At a two-day gathering of the Pacific Islands Development Forum in September, the Pacific Island countries, meeting without Australia and New Zealand, had agreed on a joint position to take to Paris. The statement included a demand to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5C, an international moratorium on coal mines and for countries to uphold the principle of “polluter pays.”

However under pressure from Australia and New Zealand—the southwest Pacific’s two main imperialist powers—the 14-member Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), meeting the following week, failed to endorse the resolution. Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, supported by New Zealand, flatly rejected such measures, despite a pro-forma PIF acknowledgement that even an increase of 1.5C above pre-industrial levels would “severely exacerbate the particular challenges facing the most vulnerable smaller island

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states of the Pacific."

Australia and New Zealand have adopted entirely hypocritical positions at the Paris conference. Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said his government would spend $1 billion over five years to assist developing countries to cope with climate change impacts and cut emissions. "Some of the most vulnerable nations are our Pacific neighbours and we are helping them to build resilience through practical action and assistance," Turnbull declared. He subsequently conceded that the money was not additional spending, but would be drawn from the existing foreign aid budget.

Kiribati President Anote Tong bluntly criticised Australia, saying it was failing to "go into bat" for its Pacific neighbours. The Pacific Islands want compensation for loss and damage included in a Paris agreement, which is resisted by developed nations. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on December 2 that US President Barak Obama met with a Pacific Island delegation in order to find a "compromise." Tong, however, said the Pacific would not back down. "We've got to dig our feet in on this," he said. "Otherwise any agreement would have no meaning for us."

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key told the conference he would commit up to $NZ200 million to support Pacific countries' climate change efforts and $20 million toward research to cut NZ's agricultural greenhouse gases. He announced a new target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 30 percent below 2005 levels, by 2030.

The target was criticised as "weak" and "unambitious" by many academics and environmental groups. Climate Action Network International said that since Key had been in office, subsidies for the production of fossil fuels had gone up over seven times and now total over $80 million in hand-outs to industry. According to research by Oil Change International, eight industrialised nations—Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the US—spend a combined $80 billion a year on government funding to private companies for fossil fuel production.

The indifference of New Zealand's ruling elite to the emerging Pacific crisis was highlighted in September when a Kiribati man seeking to be declared a climate change refugee was denied permission to remain in the country and summarily deported. Ioane Teitiota had been in custody as an illegal immigrant after the Supreme Court declared that he and his family, including three New Zealand-born children, did not qualify as refugees. Teitiota said they did not want to return to their polluted and potentially dangerous home country, which is under severe threat. The New Zealand legal precedent was duly noted around the Pacific.

The frustration of Pacific Island countries with the intransigent positions of Australia and New Zealand is exacerbating tensions over the growing influence of China in the region. Given Fiji's close ties with China, it was significant that Bainimarama took the lead speaking on behalf of the Pacific at COP21. Pacific countries have avoided specifically criticising Beijing.

All the major capitalist powers are continuing to pursue their immediate national economic interests, making an effective global climate change agreement impossible. The 2C degree international target arose from an agreement between governments in 2009 to focus on what was "realistic" rather than a scientific judgment on what was safe. In 2014 the International Panel on Climate Change reported that substantial cuts in greenhouse gas emissions were needed immediately and had to be continued over decades to avert a global disaster.

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