

# **2009 PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM LEADERS' MEETING**

## **Side Event on Climate Change**

Cairns Convention Centre, 6 August 2009

### **Opening Remarks by Ajay Chhibber**

Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and

Assistant UNDP Administrator and Regional Director for Asia and Pacific

---

### **Introduction**

Honorable Ministers and Senior Representatives of Government; Members of the Diplomatic Corps; Distinguished Panel of Presenters; Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honoured that the United Nations has been invited by the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat and the Australian Government to organise a side-event on Climate Change at this year's Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting. This side-event relates directly to the agenda of the UN Secretary-General's meeting on Climate Change during the upcoming UN General Assembly in September and the new UNDP Administrator's focus on climate change. Furthermore, we hope that this meeting will inform senior officials from the region as they prepare for the global COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen later this year.

We recognize climate change to be a critical development challenge with enormous implications for the entire range of development concerns: poverty, livelihoods, food security, conflict and social cohesion, to name a few. For the Pacific Small Island Developing States, in addition to all of these, climate change may even prove to be an existential threat. At the very least, it is becoming increasingly apparent that climate change has significant impacts in this sub-region. At a time of global economic crisis, climate change has the potential to reverse hard-won development gains in the region, which could compromise our collective ability to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and the objectives of the Pacific Plan for a prosperous, peaceful and secure region.

At the global level, we commend the Pacific leadership that led to the successful adoption of the June UN General Assembly Resolution on Climate Change and Security. We also take guidance from the 2008 Niue Declaration where Pacific Islands Forum Leaders explicitly noted the threat that climate change poses to economic growth, sustainable development, governance and security in the region.

### **Setting the Scene**

It is widely recognised that small Pacific Island Countries are on the global forefront of climate change. The latest findings from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) confirm that climate

change is one of the most important challenges to the social, economic and environmental well-being of Pacific Island Countries<sup>1</sup>.

The likely economic costs of climate change for the PICs are very significant. The small economies of the PICs are more exposed to climate change than larger countries due to their dependence on climate-sensitive industries such as tourism, agriculture and fisheries. The IPCC also notes that ecological systems of small islands will be more sensitive to the rate and magnitude of climate change and sea-level rise. Much of the infrastructure in PICs is located in coastal areas and 'would be at serious risk from inundation, flooding and physical damage,' which could disrupt food and energy supplies and tourist arrivals.

It is estimated that economic losses due to natural disasters in the 1990s alone cost the Pacific region US\$2.8 billion in real 2004 value.<sup>2</sup> Such events are projected to occur with greater frequency and intensity due to climate change. Agricultural losses due to climate change are estimated to reach US\$23-52 million per year by 2050 for Fiji alone, and the equivalent of 17-18% of GDP for Kiribati. Similarly, damage caused by sea level rise and coral bleaching in Kiribati due to climate change is estimated to cost in the region of US\$6.6 – 12.4 million annually<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> IPCC Fourth Assessment Report (AR4), 2007. *Small Islands*.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, 2004 Not If But When: Adapting to Natural Hazards in the Pacific Islands Region.

<sup>3</sup> Hay J. E., Mimura N., Campbell J., Fifita S., Koshy K., McLean R. F., Nakalevu T., Nunn P. and N. de Wet, 2003, **Climate Variability and Change and Sea-level Rise in the Pacific Islands Region: A Resource Book for Policy and Decision Makers, Educators and Other Stakeholders**. South Pacific Regional Environment Programmed, Apia, Samoa.

At the same time, it should be noted that Pacific Island Countries are only responsible for around 0.03% of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. Therefore, the challenges of climate change in the region will need to be more oriented around adaptation rather than mitigation, but capacities in this regard are very limited.

It is crucial, therefore, that PICs develop adaptation interventions and also take action to “climate-proof” their development plans and sector policies. Implementation of ecosystem and natural resources management plans to rehabilitate and conserve critical ecosystem services, and promotion of alternative livelihoods options are just a few examples of how adaptation can play an important role in reducing vulnerability to climate impacts.

Another key issue is the implication of climate change for security in the region, i.e., the linkages between environmental degradation, conflict, displacement and migration in the Pacific. The region is already dealing with security and law enforcement challenges and, as we know, has been impacted by violent conflict and political instability. Climate change adds to pre-existing pressures – on land management and tenure systems, population distress, unemployment, environmental factors and socio-economic development, further straining local and national coping mechanisms. In a vicious circle, the consequences of conflict would further weaken the ability of governments and local communities to adapt to the pressures of climate change. Thus, there is a real risk that climate change

could increase the likelihood of violent conflict, which in turn would leave communities poorer, less resilient and less able to cope with economic and social dislocations that would arise.

Our experience in the Pacific also shows that climate change can trigger significant movements of populations, both within and across borders, and has the potential to render some people stateless. I am aware that we have already witnessed human displacement in the Pacific, where people from the Carteret islands in Bougainville were forced to move to the mainland, possibly due to the effects of climate change. Such displacement has caused distress to those forced to move, and has led to questions about land ownership and access to resources on the mainland.

### **Outline of Presentations and Speakers**

Let me now turn to the presentations that we are about to hear. I am joined by a distinguished panel of speakers, representing the Australian Government, UN agencies and Greenpeace, who will address some of these key aspects of climate change.

We start today with a live satellite link with the Greenpeace ship “Arctic Sunrise” to discuss the impacts of climate change on arctic ice organized by Ms. Shirley Atatagi (Pacific Climate Policy Advisor, Greenpeace Australia Pacific). The presenters will be Seni Nabou (Greenpeace Pacific Political Advisor) and Mr. Jeremy Tager (Head of Political Unit in Greenpeace Australia Pacific).

This is followed by a presentation by Mr. Howard Bamsey (Deputy Secretary and Special Envoy, Department of Climate Change, Australian Government) on the “Road to Copenhagen”. This presentation will provide an overview of the international political and consultative mechanisms before the global meeting on Climate Change in Copenhagen, focusing on the development of the Bali Action Plan, the multinational process and complementary forums that have ensued since Bali, and what to expect over the coming six months. I expect that this will provide very timely information for senior officials from the region in preparation for the forthcoming global COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen.

Turning to “climate change and impacts on migration”, Mr. Richard Towle (Regional Representative, UNHCR Regional Office for Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific) will make a presentation focusing on climate change, natural disasters and human displacement. He will examine the humanitarian dimensions of rising sea levels and draw attention to key issues such as the protection of the rights of affected populations.

Last, but not least, we will explore the interface between climate change, natural disasters and the potential for conflict in the Pacific region. Jean-Luc Stalon (Senior Crisis Prevention & Recovery Adviser & Manager, UNDP Pacific Centre) will make a presentation on a new regional initiative to research these linkages and build capacity of regional organisations to address them. This initiative was formally endorsed by the 2009 Forum

Regional Security Committee.

I am sure that the presentations and discussions will highlight the human security and development challenges of climate change in the region, and will provide insight and direction as to how we can collectively address these critical development issues facing the Pacific region.