



Tuvalu: First casualty of climate change

HONOLULU — It's too late for Tuvalu, a small island nation in the Pacific. Ten thousand people, Tuvalu's entire population, are packing their bags as their homes among nine low-level atolls are being swallowed by the rising sea. These are the facts of life: the Earth is warming, sea levels are rising, and Tuvalu is quietly being erased from the surface of the Earth.

The Tuvalu islands are only the first casualties of climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, predicts a 50-centimetre to 1-metre rise in sea levels over the next century. A rise of one metre would place 17.5 percent of Bangladesh, six percent of the Netherlands, and 80 percent of Atoll Majuro of the Marshall Islands under water, according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC. Low-lying coastal zones of developed countries and small islands could also be seriously affected. Rising sea levels are only part of the problems that are caused by climate change. The 1.4-5.8°Celsius rise over the next century will also increase flooding, the intensity of storms, and droughts in Asia and Africa. It will also change the distribution of rainfall. This is only the tip of the rapidly melting iceberg.



The disappearance of Tuvalu introduces a host of other questions that need to be dealt with and fast. What happens when more of these island nations disappear, potentially displacing seven million people? Can there be compensation for the loss of a country, its history, its culture, its way of life? How do we put a price on that? Who will pay it?

While developed nations quibble over the details of the Kyoto Protocol, Tuvalu islanders are literally losing their homeland. To the United States and other developed nations, it is a question of fairness. They are focused on how to apportion the burden of responding to the threat. xDeveloped nations argue that developing

nations like India and China will be the leading creators of greenhouse gases in a decade or two. For U.S. negotiators, any framework that doesn't take this development into account is unfair.

Climate change is not a future concern; it is an immediate national security threat. The Diaspora of a people is being created. It is difficult to understand what this means.

The Tuvaluan people need to build new lives in a new land. Australia and New Zealand have begun to take in environmental refugees, but they will have to adjust to the cultures that will surround them. After having lived in relative isolation, difficulties are inevitable.

Tuvalu is a small, largely homogeneous nation. Its population is 96 percent Polynesian, of whom 97 percent belong to the Church of Tuvalu. There are no mobile phones, one radio station, and one Internet service provider. Most remarkably, there are no regular military forces for the island nation. This country is so secure and so small that it did not anticipate a need to defend its territory.

They will enter into a world that is not their own. The burden of maintaining their culture and religion without a geographic centre will be set upon them. On the other hand, the Tuvaluans will need to preserve their past. The collective memory of a small society will be cleaved as its people are forced to take refuge in separate lands. And memory is all that the Tuvaluans will have left of their homeland. Their burial grounds, their schools, their homes, their churches will be enveloped by the ocean. The Tuvaluans can never go home again.

We must ensure that Tuvalu is our only casualty. Climate change and sea level rise should force all of us to face up to our complicity in destroying cultures and the need to accept responsibility for ensuring the safekeeping of a people. We should set up funds for those who are losing their homes.

It is time to realise: "Climate change ... is nothing less than a form of slow death."

Eun Jung Cahill Che, The Japan Times: Aug. 26, 2001