

UN sounds alarm on threat to Pacific nations' security posed by climate change



Nukunonu Atoll seaside, one of the regions of the world vulnerable to climate change [File Photo]

6 August 2009 – With rising sea levels threatening to inundate Pacific Island nations, United Nations officials have issued a call for urgent action to be taken to ensure that human security and development gains are not reversed.

“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,” Ajay Chhibber, Director of the Asia and the Pacific Regional Bureau of the UN Development Programme (**UNDP**), said at the two-day 40th Pacific Leaders Forum in Cairns, Australia, which ends today.

Mr. Chhibber also warned that during the current financial turmoil, global warming could potentially reverse “hard-won development gains in the region, which could compromise our collective ability to achieve the Millennium Development Goals [that seek to slash poverty, hunger and a host of other social ills by 2015] and plans for a prosperous, peaceful and secure region.”

The Pacific region is one of the most disaster-prone areas in the world, with natural hazards likely to worsen as the planet’s temperature rises.

Some villagers in Kiribati have already been forced from their homes by rising sea levels, but officials have cautioned that relocation could spark conflict due to traditional land rights.

It is clear that climate change “adds to the scale and complexity of human movement and displacement in the region,” said Richard Towle, the Regional Representative for Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (**UNHCR**).

“We need to act now if we are to find solutions for people whose homes, lands and livelihoods are, as we speak, being destroyed by rising sea levels and violent fluctuations in weather patterns in the region,” he added.

In a bid to quell potential climate change-driven conflicts before they erupt, UNDP is helping to set up a new programme in the Pacific region in partnership with other organizations in the area.

The “Interface between Climate Change, Disasters and Potential for Conflict in the Pacific” initiative seeks to boost national and regional groups’ ability to prevent and manage violent conflicts triggered by global warming.

"Climate change is increasing the severity and frequency of disasters, which are causing displacement, livelihood insecurity and increasing instability," according to Jean-Luc Stalon, senior regional advisor on Crisis Prevention and Recovery at UNDP's Pacific Centre in Suva, Fiji.

"We need to focus on integrating climate change risks into conflict prevention efforts – before it is too late and too costly," he warned.

In his message to the Forum, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced yesterday that the UN is establishing a new system to mitigate the impact of the global economic crisis on poorer countries, such as those in the Pacific region that are already being hobbled by climate change.

"The full repercussions (of the economic crisis) have yet to be felt, but already we know we must do our utmost to prevent the unfavourable economic climate from undermining our efforts to fight climate change and achieve the Millennium Development Goals," Mr. Ban said.

"For the Pacific, the downturn is likely to hit hard, limiting resources for development, leading to job losses and a decline in exports, and creating a risk of instability," he added in the message, delivered by Supachai Panitchpakdi, Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

The new Global Impact and Vulnerability Alert System will allow the world body "to better track the impact of the crisis – and thereby better respond."

Noting that climate change is at the top of the Forum's agenda, the Secretary-General called on participants to enhance efforts to 'seal the deal' at the international meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December which will strive to reach a new pact on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

"Toward that end, I urge you to attend the climate summit that I will be convening next month in New York, and use that gathering to create the political momentum we need for an agreement," he said.

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