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Facing droughts, Pacific islands need urgent risk mitigation steps, UN warns



Water levels are receding in Pacific islands

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Amid growing concerns about drought crises in some small island States of the Pacific, the United Nations today called for comprehensive risk reduction steps to be put in place to protect vulnerable populations living in delicate ecosystems.

“It really is time to assist Tuvalu and Tokelau to increase storage capacities and manage their resources sustainably, including more effective warnings for drier spells,” UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) head of policy John Harding [said](#), referring to two of the region’s island States and territories.

“With climate change predictions pointing to more acute La Niñas in the futures, plans must also include assistance for communities that will be displaced if existing freshwater is not sufficient,” he added, referring to the weather pattern characterized by unusually cool ocean temperatures in the central and eastern tropical Pacific that can bring abnormal conditions to widely separate areas of the world, from floods to droughts to below- or above-normal temperatures.

On the positive side Mr. Harding noted that the strong correlation between drought and La Niña could be a blessing in disguise, since the phenomenon is increasingly predictable and climate experts can inform decision-makers weeks and even months in advance, allowing for increased storage or stockpiling of emergency supplies in advance of a crisis.

The UN Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Assistance ([OCHA](#)) has identified solar powered desalination units and improved rain catchment and water storage as longer-term mitigation measures against future droughts.

Tuvalu, a collection of far-flung atolls with a population of some 12,000, today began a three-week needs assessment of water, agriculture and health facilities. The most affected areas are the capital city of Funafuti, as well as Nukulaelae and Nanumaga. Australia is covering the fuel costs for the assessment of eight outer islands.

Also affected by the severe drought are Kiribati, with over 112,000 people, the Cook Islands, a self-governing democracy in free association with New Zealand with a population of about 12,000, and Tokelau, a New Zealand territory with about 1,500 inhabitants.

“The critical low levels of freshwater in Tuvalu and Tokelau are just further wake-up calls about the vulnerability of SIDS [small island developing States] to the threats posed by increasing demands on natural resources and development practices that are not sufficiently in tune with these emerging risks,” Mr. Harding said.

“Small island States such as Tuvalu and Tokelau have access to a finite amount of water, mainly from groundwater and rainfall. Managing these resources in the face of increased and diverse demand is a challenge that authorities now face on a daily basis.”

Tuvalu and Tokelau have declared a state of emergency and are receiving emergency assistance from the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and Australia, New Zealand and the United States, including freshwater, water tanks, portable desalination units and personnel to operate the additional units and fix existing ones.

Many SIDS used the pulpit offered by the General Assembly’s annual general debate last month to call on the world to pay greater attention to their vulnerability to climate change, warning that the international community was not moving quickly enough to either mitigate the effects of the change or support the poorest countries as they tried to adapt. They stressed that sustainable development would not be possible as rising sea levels threatened to swamp them.

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