

## Pacific Islands More Vulnerable to Climate Change

*Shailendra Singh*

SUVA, Feb 22 (IPS) - The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)'s climate coordinator in the South Pacific says that a recent United Nations report on climate change has "underestimated" the threat to millions of people in the region from sea-level rise. While the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report provides a detailed picture of how humans activity is changing earth's climate by burning fossil fuels, it fails to adequately identify the real risks of sea level rise, something particularly relevant to the Pacific, WWF coordinator Ashvini Fernando told IPS in an interview. She said that that the danger was graver than outlined in the U.N. report, and that by underestimating it, the report puts at risk millions of people who live on low-lying coasts not just in the Pacific, but also around the world.

"Research using scientific models different to that of the IPCC have predicted much larger increases in sea level, exceeding one metre over the next century," said Fernando, who is regional climate change coordinator for the WWF's South Pacific programme. "This would have dire implications for the Pacific as this region has many atolls and low-lying coastal areas (which) are only several meters above sea level." Fernando said that even on high islands, much of the population lives along the coast which is typically low-lying so sea-level rise, especially by as much as, or more than one metre, would be disastrous for the region.

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The IPCC report, released earlier this month in Paris, blamed human activities for global warming. It said in its grimmest warning ever that rising temperatures could cause more droughts, heat waves and rising seas for 10,000 years even if emissions of greenhouse gases are capped. It predicted a three-degree Celsius temperature rise, which it said was "conservative". The real rise could be double that figure, resulting in truly catastrophic conditions for all life on earth. Experts say that the tiny Pacific Island nations, which collectively account for a mere 0.0012 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, are the most vulnerable and would be the first to feel the full brunt of global warming.

Among those most at risk are some of the world's lowest-lying islands, such as Kiribati, Vanuatu, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and parts of Papua New Guinea. In Vanuatu, an entire coastal village on the island of Tegua is being forced to move to higher ground, its huts flooded by surging seas while Kiribati, with a population of 92,000 people, is also having to take drastic action. Reacting to the U.N. report, Kiribati President Anote Tong, told the media that world efforts to stem global warming were welcome but may be too late. He said that his nation was already suffering, with land and houses washed away and even some public buildings threatened. Fernando said that the U.N. report vindicated long-standing calls by Pacific Island governments and civil society groups such as the WWF for a meaningful global agreement on combating climate change.

"The Fourth Assessment Report only goes to highlight why such an agreement is necessary and urgent. We continue to push for and hope that developed and industrialised countries will heed the report and make the necessary changes and emissions cuts that will ensure dangerous climate change does not happen." On whether the new measures announced by the United States (which alone contributes to about 25 percent of climate changing gas emissions) and Australia to cut back on emissions went far enough, She said proposed measures outlined in the President George W. Bush's State of the Union Address were inadequate. The most effective response, she said, would be for all governments to agree to a global solution advocating rapid expansion of renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies.

"If the U.S. and Australia were serious about tackling climate change, they would join the Kyoto Protocol -- a globally accepted means by which to begin combating climate change," she said. "WWF hopes that the global community will take on the challenge of climate change both now and in the future making the deep cuts in emissions that are necessary to combat this global problem." Because the Pacific Islands are small and un-influential and their concerns easily ignored, their governments have been actively engaged in international climate change negotiations for over a decade through the Alliance of Small Islands States or AOSIS, a negotiating bloc at climate change negotiations.

She said that given the consequences of climate change, Pacific Island countries need to engage even more effectively in international climate policy negotiations to produce a global agreement based on the Kyoto Protocol to keep climate change well below the 2 degree Celsius temperature rise over pre-industrial levels. "This report is a reminder that we have to act and act now. This year is the last chance for governments worldwide to set meaningful targets to curb emissions of climate changing gases at the 13th U.N. Climate Change Conference in December, in Indonesia, Fernando said.