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“We have to move now”: Islanders watch as their home disappears in the sea

April 20, 2016

By Mark Bowling



Time for action: Rising sea levels have washed away houses in the Carteret Islands, wiped out vegetable gardens, contaminated fresh water supplies and even split the Huene Island in two.

ALMOST 6000 islanders to Australia’s north face forced evacuation as they watch their low-lying Pacific homelands disappear under rising seas.

Their plight amounts to just a drop in the ocean, and yet these island people take solace from Pope Francis’ call for action on climate change and the environment, and for the dignity of displaced persons.

The communities of four atoll groups – Carteret Islands, Mortlock Islands, Tasman Islands and Fead Islands – have already started moving to neighbouring Bougainville, because storm surges flood their islands, eating away their beaches and coastal lands, and washing away their food gardens.

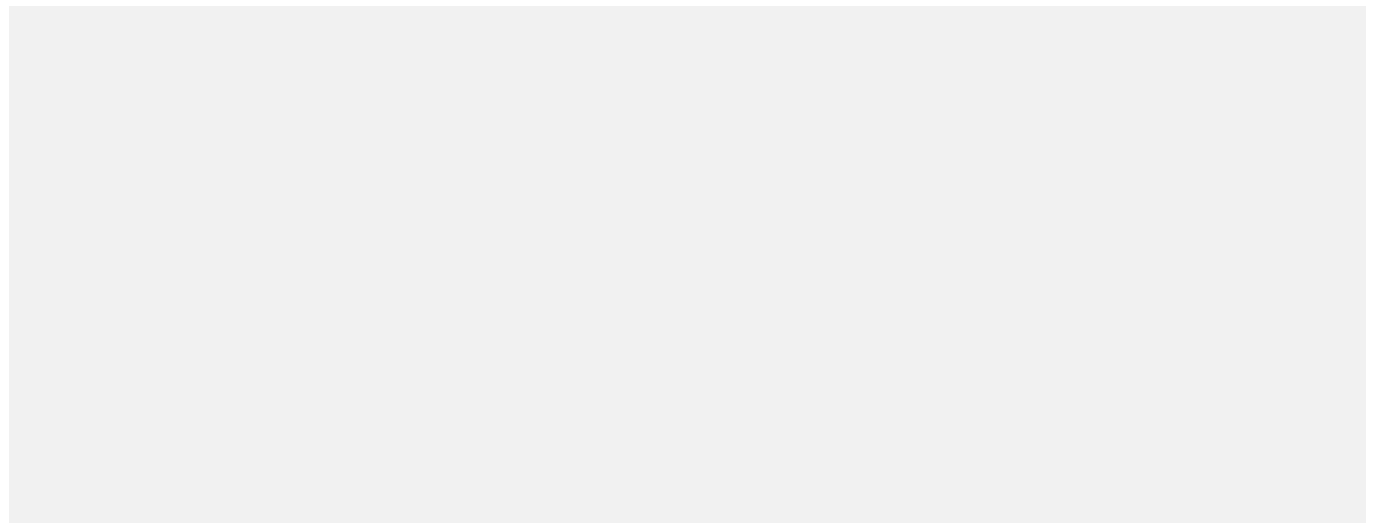
On some of the most populated atolls deep wells are already contaminated by salt water and the people are forced to rely on coconut water and rainwater for drinking and everyday use.

The closest of the islands are more than 80km from Bougainville, which is an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea.

“I love my islands, we live by the sea and they provide for us every day, but we have to move now,” Ursula Rakova, a Catholic woman who was born in the Carterets, said.

“We are already suffering the impacts of climate change and rising sea levels – this is a matter of life and death.”

Ms Rakova heads the organisation, Tulele Peisa, which means “Sailing in the wind on our own”, and has the task of shifting displaced island families.





Seeking help: Pais Taehu and Ursula Rakova during their visit to Brisbane to raise awareness of the problems in the Pacific Islands. Photo: Mark Bowling.

Ten families from the Carteret Islands have already moved to a 48ha plantation on Bougainville, donated by the Catholic Church.

But 140 families remain on the atolls, which are their traditional homes.

Ms Rakova is one of two island leaders visiting Australia on a speaking tour, pleading for government and community aid – in the name of respect and dignity.

She has described the loss of their homelands and their livelihoods, which has reduce them to amongst the world's poorest people, and forced their displacement.

Ms Rakova took solace in Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment *Laudato Si* (Praise Be), which highlighted the plight of those suffering directly from climate change.

The Pontiff called for "decisive action, here and now", to stop environmental degradation and global warming, and argued that environmental damage was intimately linked to global inequality.

"We know how unsustainable is the behaviour of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity," Pope Francis wrote.

During her visit to Australia, Ms Rakova is accompanied by Pais Taehu, a traditional chief from the Tasman Islands, the most far-flung of the island groups off Bougainville, and which support a population of 1500 people.

"We are affected the same way as the Carteret Islands. One day, somehow, whether we like it or not, we will have to move," Chief Pais, who is chairman of the Temarai Association, a voice for the welfare of the outer atolls people, said.

"In the long run, it is better to act now than waiting for anything to happen."

While the atoll peoples face the full force of climate change, Ms Rakova was critical of some of the international efforts to help her people.

"There have been training teams, research projects, media series, studies by lawyers – 27 programs – aimed at disaster risk reduction, such things as building up the sea walls and the gardens to stop saltwater intrusion and planting mangroves," she said.

"Sea walls could cost billions of dollars. Replanting mangroves could take 10 years. In the meantime what do the island people do? Get drowned? Float in the sea? Eat sponges from the sea?

"It is important that we can master our own destiny. We want to accept assistance, but on our own terms. We know the situation on the ground and what needs to be done."

Ms Rakova said she accepted that climate change had caused irreversible loss and damage to her islands and that displacement was inevitable.

She said funding would be better directed towards relocating people to the mainland, finding appropriate land and building houses.

"My vision is that Carteret Islanders are living sustainable livelihoods and are safe and secure wherever they are – that they have enough land space to grow food and cash crops to sustain their family incomes," Ms Rakova said.

She singled out Caritas Australia and Catholic Mission as amongst the humanitarian organisations which had delivered focused and practical assistance so far.

This included providing agricultural projects on the mainland. But in a direct plea to government, community groups and individual benefactors, she said building mainland houses for the Carteret Islanders would cost about \$8500 each or about \$1.6 million for the islands' 150 families.

"That is not a big cost for a neighbour as big as Australia," she said.

Ms Rakova said direct support for community-based relocation projects like Tulele Peisa was better than aid money being channelled through government projects.

Caritas Australia's chief executive officer Paul O'Callaghan said, as one of the highest per capita emitters in the world, Australia had a special responsibility to show leadership in mitigating and preventing the negative impacts of climate change in the Pacific region.

Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania executive committee president Archbishop John Ribat of Port Moresby, said he was heartened by growing world concern about climate change and global warming.

"Pope Francis in his recent encyclical Laudato Si invites – indeed urges – the global human family to see our planet and its peoples as our universal home," he said.

"The protection of the atmosphere and the oceans are powerful examples of the need for political representatives and leaders of nations to take responsibility for the wellbeing of peoples beyond their own particular shores or borders."

Australian Religious Response to Climate Change president Thea Ormerod said ratifying the Paris Agreement was a first step for Australia to do its fair share of accelerating the shift to low-carbon technologies and building resilience in vulnerable countries.

"In many places across this fragile planet of ours, global warming is no longer just a theory. It is destroying lives and livelihoods," she said.

Donations can be made directly via an account for Tulele Peisa administered by the Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane. Email Sr Wendy Flannery at wendy.flannery@gmail.com.

By Mark Bowling

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