



COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
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STATEMENT OF
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FIJI MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK

before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND THE
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

Climate Change and Vulnerable Societies

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STATEMENT

Mr. Chairman,
Congressmen

Hon. Members of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment.

Good morning,

I am indeed deeply honoured and pleased to be here today to testify before this honorable committee on the issue of *Climate Change and Vulnerable Societies*. I was requested to share our insights as small island states on the critical issue of global warming and its drastic impacts on our island-states and indeed the rest of the world.

In particular, I will try and provide some insights into the following:

- First ; *what steps the U.S. should take in response to the UN Climate Change Conference held in Bali in December of 2007;*
- Secondly, given that Australia announced at the Bali conference that it would sign the Kyoto Protocol thus making the U.S. the only country that has not signed up to this protocol, *how can the U.S. advance international cooperation on climate change?;*



- Thirdly, *should the U.S. engage the Alliance of Small Island States?*; and
- Last but not least *what ways can the U.S. and the UN work together to protect vulnerable societies?*

I am not a scientist, nor do I claim to be an expert on climate change. I am simply a concerned citizen from a very vulnerable society, so I will not attempt to justify my statements by using climate change jargons such “*parts per billion or one degree rise in temperature or greenhouse gas emission*” —terminologies which you are only too familiar with— but rather, I appear here today to attempt to put a *human face* to the climate change debate.

Let me start by saying that when it comes to climate change, the small islands states, like the one I have the honour to represent today, have been the proverbial “*canary in the coal mine*”. Our leaders have long since realized that the climate was changing and in their wisdom invited the world’s attention to this new phenomenon. Addressing the UN almost 20 years ago, the President of the Republic of Maldives drew the world’s attention to this issue when he warned the world of the growing threat to the planet posed by climate change and associated rises in sea levels and further warning of the consequences of our failure to act to stave off this threat.

Today we talk about climate change not only as an environmental issue but also as a sustainable development issue; its effects on health, water, food, energy and transport—in truth this debate, we submit should be about *political will and visionary leadership*. Political will and visionary leadership has put man on the moon and made the exploration of Mars possible; political will and visionary leadership have enabled man to explore the depths of the oceans, and Mr. Chairman, only sustained political will and visionary leadership can save mankind from the threat caused by climate change to its very existence.

I have come here today with the true conviction that whilst we all should value the present, and our comfort living standards, we must, in similar vein, also value the future and what it holds for mankind.



Mr. Chairman, it is a scientific fact that sea level rise and soil erosion are threatening the very existence of some of the low lying atoll countries of island states and cities in the Pacific; our seas are warming, our coral are bleaching and dying and its effect on fish stocks and on our livelihood is being felt across the Pacific; our tourism and way of life as we know it is being affected and in some instances, threatened.

Mr. Chairman—today, we are thousands of miles from the Pacific and many might not be receptive to what I have just said; therefore Mr. Chairman *may I; on behalf of my own government invite you and members of your committee to the Pacific region to see for yourselves how vulnerable the Pacific society is.* Come talk to our traditional leaders, come talk to our elders and listen to their stories of the changes in climate they have experienced in their lifetime, come talk to our communities and see for yourselves the time and resources being committed to adapting and mitigating against the real effects of climate change.

If no *immediate practical action* is taken to adapt and mitigate against these effects, the world will soon have to deal with the mass migration of some one billion *climate refugees*; some of our low lying atoll islands will disappear; all we ask is that *no island be left behind.* We do not want to become climate refugees. If no *immediate practical action* is taken, the world will also have to face the consequences of droughts and water shortages in a scale not seen before. If no *immediate practical action* is taken, the world will have to deal with food shortage caused by climate change—all this issues Mr. Chairman can be averted or mitigated against if there is political will and visionary leadership to take *immediate practical action.*

Any plans to adapt and mitigate against the effects of climate change will no doubt have its costs; however, no matter how expansive our plans are, the cost of inaction would be vastly higher. For those of us in vulnerable societies, it is far better to fight climate change now rather than to suffer the consequences of climate change later on.

As I speak to you today, it is perhaps worth remembering the people of Vanuatu who have recently lost their island to the effects of rising sea levels. As I speak to you today perhaps it is worth recalling the vivid media pictures of sea water bubbling up in Tuvalu.



Mr. Chairman, for us in the Pacific, climate change is not a distant possibility; it is ***clear and present danger***

Mr. Chairman, my time is short. I will now try and provide some insights into ***what steps the U.S. should take in response to the UN Climate Change Conference held in Bali in December of 2007***. My plea is simple; come join us—come join the international community. In fact, the world needs the United States of America for our fight against the negative effects of Climate Change to succeed.

Mr. Chairman, the Bali Outcome was, in my view, collectively a major step forward by the international community in addressing climate change. The Bali conference also brought out the continuing differences, especially between developed and developing countries, on how best to implement and improve existing commitments under UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol; commitments that are equitable, sustainable and promote the development prospects of developing countries—something which is often referred to as ***common but differential responsibilities***. It is my humble view Mr. Chairman, that the US has always possesses visionary leadership, the world now needs your political will to overcome these differences. Come join us—come join the international community.

How then can the U.S. advance international cooperation on climate change?

Mr. Chairman, the building blocks of the climate change debate points to four major areas: ***climate change mitigation, climate change adaptation, technology development & transfer and finance & investment***. These areas should be the corner stone of any international cooperation on climate change and in my humble view the US can advance international cooperation on climate change through ***effective partnership*** with the international community embodied in the United Nations.

I was also asked whether or not the ***US should engage the Alliance of Small Island States?*** of which Fiji is a member. My answer is this. Whilst my reply would naturally be in the affirmative, I would go further and say that the US should not only engage the Alliance of Small Island States, it should also engage the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) through our respective ambassadors based in the United Nations in New York. We in the Pacific look forward to your ***effective partnership*** and engagement on a subject which no doubt is the ***“defining issue of our era”***



Mr. Chairman, may I conclude with this question.

What ways can the U.S. and the UN work together to protect vulnerable societies?

The word vulnerable visualizes in us; *the weak, the defenseless, and those at risk*". So how does one protect the weak, the defenseless and those at risk in our society? Allow me Mr. Chairman to paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi by saying that ***a system is judged by what it can do for the most vulnerable in society***. Having said that let me also add, that the oft quoted saying, "***no man is an island unto himself***", is most relevant in the climate change debate.

The effects of climate change will affect the US as surely as it will affect the other members of the United Nations. There is ***no immunity clause*** available to either party. This reality Mr. Chairman leads me to conclude that only in ***effective partnership*** can we deal with this enormous challenge to our way of life. The UN cannot address climate change alone, no one can. We in the Pacific and indeed the UN is looking for a common vision, a global consensus, a global alliance for action; in essence a global strategy. Only by working together in ***effective partnership*** can we deliver results to those most vulnerable in our society.

Let us move on from ***rhetoric to results***; let us truly make a difference, together in ***effective partnership*** let us follow through our commitments with concrete actions. For us in the Pacific, there are a few countries who have stepped in to assist us mitigate against the negative effects and assist in eliminating contributing factors of climate change. There are now innovative arrangements and modalities being formulated at the UN with our bilateral partners on how to ensure maximum utilization of assistance. You may wish to have a look at these modalities and see whether they are worth replicating. Don't get me wrong though, if the Italians, the Austrians, the Icelanders and Turkish can assist our vulnerable societies – I am sure the United States of America can do much much better.

I thank you Mr. Chairman