



The “Bula Bulletin”



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Kiribati... Where’s that?

While this may be a question that you are asking yourself right now, it may also be a question that future generations ask, if the climate scientists are correct in their forecasts of sea-level rise in the Pacific region.

The Republic of Kiribati (pronounced Kiribas) is an island nation in the central Pacific, about half-way between Hawai’i and Australia. It is made up of 32 low-lying atolls and one raised island (Banaba Island), and is unique as a nation in having land territory in all four (eastern, western, northern and southern) hemispheres. It also has a vast sea territory, with an exclusive economic zone of almost 2 million sq miles. Kiribati, however, is probably better known internationally as one of the island nations most at risk from climate change. It is the ‘front of frontlines’.

Earlier this month I was a team member for a Pacific Conference of Churches’ workshop in Kiribati, and also very fortunate to be able to extend my stay for some climate-change meetings and a visit to Abaiang, an outer atoll*.

The workshop had representatives from the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC), the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of God, NGOs and the government, and was held in the *maneaba* (open-sided community hall) adjacent to the headquarters of the KPC in Antebuka. Rethinking Kiribati by building self-reliance and empowerment among the *I-Kiribati* (people of Kiribati) was the focus of the training, and three issues: climate change; good governance; and HIV/AIDS, were examined.

Climate change in Kiribati

Most of the land in Kiribati is less than 3 metres above sea level, and scientists predict that perhaps as early as the middle of this century Kiribati, along with the other low-lying Pacific nations of Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, will be submerged under rising seas, and its people forced to relocate elsewhere.



Climate change, good governance and global attention

In early September Ban Ki-Moon made a two-day visit to Kiribati, the first-ever visit to the atoll nation by a Secretary-General of the UN. He reaffirmed his commitment to ensuring that the issue of climate change remains a top priority on the international development agenda. He said:



“1 Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, 2a to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people...”

Isaiah 10: 1-2a (NIV)



Ban Ki-Moon, Kiribati, 3rd Sept. 2011, Source: UNDP

* 50% of the 110,000 population live in South Tarawa, the main atoll and capital of Kiribati



His Excellency Anote Tong,
USP, Suva, 11th May 2011

“Many countries are dealing with climate change. But here, climate change threatens your territory, your culture and your very way of life”.

National elections were held earlier this month, and in December Anote Tong, the caretaker President, will learn whether he has been successful in his bid to retain the Presidency for a third and final term. For many years, Tong has been one of a few ‘lone’ voices in the international arena advocating the urgency of climate change. In May this year, Tong gave an address at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva. “Climate change is *the* great moral challenge facing humanity this century” he said. “The *I-Kiribati* need to be prepared for the possibility of relocation ‘beyond our islands’. One day it won’t be a matter of choice” he said. Relocation, however, should be a climate-change adaptation option of last resort.

Climate change adaptation in Kiribati

“Most people in Kiribati don’t understand climate change” said Claire Anterea, a local climate-change campaigner and secretary of the Pacific Calling Partnership NGO. “However they do understand the changes that are happening to their environment. You have to know how to approach them on the subject” she said. According to the Kiribati Adaptation Programme, addressing these short-term changes is the best strategy to prepare for long-term impacts. Several NGOs are working in Kiribati to raise awareness of climate-change issues with the *I-Kiribati* and also to assist in reducing the vulnerability of communities to climate change.

Mangroves: The loss of mangroves from coastal regions increases the exposure of coastal areas to sea-level rise and storm surges.

The replanting of mangroves is a simple and widely-practised technique in South Tarawa and elsewhere, and Ban Ki-Moon during his recent visit commented: “Planting mangroves gives us a good lesson that if you care, if we care, for nature we will be better off in making this Planet Earth more environmentally hospitable, more environmentally sustainable.”



What can we do?

“Each of us could climb a coconut tree... But there are more people than coconut trees!”

Claire Anterea
Secretary, Pacific
Calling Partnership

“¹⁰ I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.”

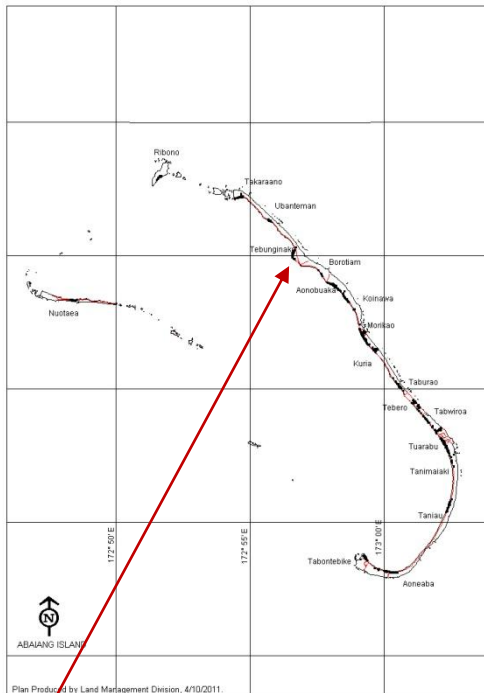
Jeremiah 17:10
(NRSV)

Seawalls: A more robust, costly and long-term approach to the protection of coastal areas is the construction of seawalls. Newly-constructed seawalls are to be seen in several locations around South Tarawa, and the preferred design seems to be sandbags filled with cement. The seawalls are not continuous, however, and great care has to be taken in their positioning and construction. Short sections of seawall can make adjacent unprotected shorelines more unstable and prone to increased erosion.



The relocation of Tebunginako village, Abaiang Island

Upon first sight, you would think that the area around Tebunginako (pronounced Darebooneenako) village in Abaiang was an extreme example of recent climate change. Dozens of dead coconut trees litter the landscape, other fruit trees and crops have vanished and the village of 60 households has been forced to relocate to near-by land.



Tebunginako village,
Abaiang Island



A scientific study has concluded that the devastation is man made, *but* from the activities of previous generations of villagers living in the area, and *not* from recent economic activities in countries elsewhere. Over a hundred years ago, the villagers blocked an ocean / lagoon channel, preventing the natural flow of sand along the passage and into the lagoon. This action caused instability and on-going shoreline readjustment. Then 15 years or so ago, the seawall was breached allowing sea water to penetrate a brackish pond used to farm milk fish.

With contaminated land and the milk-fish business destroyed, the villagers realised that they would have to move. Over the space of a few years small family clusters relocated to other adjacent areas where they owned land. Paradoxically, this relocation was not the first time that the villagers had been uprooted. In colonial times, the authorities forced the islanders to settle together on the calmer lagoon-side of the atoll for 'ease of administration'. Today, only the Roman Catholic Church building and hall remain at the saline site and recently, they approached the government for financial assistance to relocate away from the area. Individual households received no financial help when they relocated a few years ago.

The future: a message of hope

The landscape of Tebunginako is a timely reminder of the likely future impacts of climate change in Kiribati and other low-lying islands. Long before islands are submerged physically by rising sea levels, the land will become uninhabitable because of the invasion of salt water into the subterranean fresh-water supplies (known as lens) beneath each atoll.

Rev. Rewi Tereroko, the KPC Moderator and Chair of the National Church Council of Kiribati said: "I do not disbelieve the scientists, but I do not depend on them, I depend on the love of God... There is always hope and God loves the people of Kiribati".

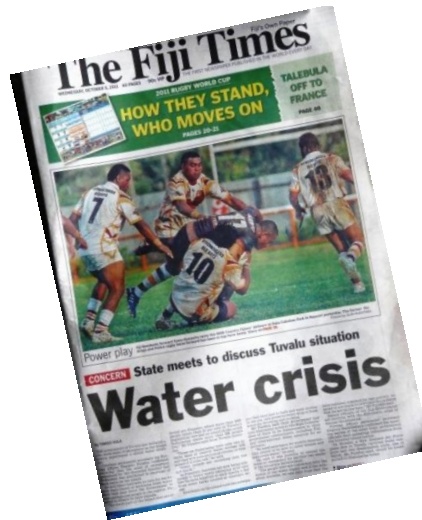
According to Kiribati tradition, a frigate bird (the bird flying across the ocean on the national flag of Kiribati) sends messages from place to place. Let us hear the cry of the *I-Kiribati*, respond by passing on their plea and, in return, send them a message of accompaniment and hope.



Prayers and action:

- Pray for those around the world who are thirsty and whose crops and livestock are dying from conditions of drought.
- Pray for the *I-Kiribati* and others who live in low-lying atolls and who face uncertain futures from rising sea levels.
- Pray for the people of Tuvalu that they continue to receive emergency supplies of water, and that the much-needed rain falls in the islands.
- Give thanks for emergency response teams and donor agencies who respond promptly to emergencies around the world.
- Pray for those developing new technologies, such as desalination and water-conservation methods.
- Pray for government and other representatives who meet in Durban at the end of November to negotiate on climate change; pray that those who are already suffering from the effects of climate change receive a fair and just deal.
- Climate change is happening *NOW*; *NOW* is the time for climate justice; let us act *NOW* in Christian love, while we still can...

Tuvalu water crisis: national emergency



I returned from Kiribati to the headline, *Water crisis*, splashed over the front page of the Fiji Times.

Tuvalu, another atoll nation, made up of 9 low-lying islands and located in the South Pacific between Kiribati and Fiji, declared a national emergency on 28th September. The population of 10,600 is experiencing a severe water shortage. At the point of declaration, Funafuti, the capital island, had a total public water reserve of 3 weeks on a ration of 40 litres per *household* per day.

The recommended UN daily consumption rate is 100 litres of water per *person*, and based on the UN recommendation, Nukulaelae, the second-most southern island, only had water to last its 333 residents just 6 days.

The critical situation was not just confined to the two islands only. The entire country experienced unusually low rainfall in the last quarter of 2010, and this year conditions have worsened still further. The past 12 months have been the second driest in Funafuti's 78-years of records, and the Tuvaluan Meteorological Service warns of a La Niña situation approaching the Pacific. Drought conditions are expected to persist to January 2012.

International response

The international response to the national emergency was swift:

- A temporary desalination plant has been provided by the New Zealand (NZ) Defence Force, with replacement plants from the UK and Australia;
- 100,000 Lt of water arrived on a NZ plane;
- the Japanese Embassy provided spare parts for an existing desalination plant in Funafuti; and
- UNICEF supplied a solar plant and the WHO technical equipment and community toolkits.

Thankfully, the water shortage has not coincided with increased health issues, as the incidences of diarrhoeal illnesses and respiratory complaints have not risen. The situation still remains fragile, however.

“¹⁷ When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. ¹⁸ I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water and the dry land springs of water”.
Isaiah 41: 17-28 (NRSV)

Next time we find ourselves complaining about the rain or, absent-minded, we leave a tap running, thank God for *our* abundant fresh water, and spare a thought for the people of Tuvalu.

God bless
Julia