Our country will vanish': Pacific islanders bring desperate message to Australia

Kiribati and other low-lying countries are under threat from climate change, and while their people would rather stay behind, they may be left with no choice

By Ben Doherty Saturday 13 May 2017 www.theguardian.com

“The archipelago of Kiribati is the world’s lowest-lying country, with an average height above sea level of just two metres. Photograph: Jonas Gratzer/LightRocket via Getty Images

“Like a drop of water in a bucket, on its own is small, but if there are many, many drops, soon it is overflowing.”

Erietera Aram’s water analogy is apposite. His country faces being lost under the waves of the Pacific Ocean.

The i-Kiribati man is in Australia delivering his message about the reality of climate change in his country, and of its immediacy. Each discussion, he says, is like a drop of water, adding to the one before it, slowly building understanding of the existential threat to his people and place.

“Climate change is not something off in the future, it’s not a problem for later. We are living it now,” he says.
The archipelago of Kiribati – 33 tiny coral atolls spanning 3.5m square kilometres of ocean – is the world’s lowest-lying country, with an average height above sea level of just two metres.

Most of the 113,000 i-Kiribati live crammed on to Tarawa, the administrative centre, a chain of islets that curve in a horseshoe shape around a lagoon.

“My place is very small,” Aram says. “If you stand in the middle, you can see water on both sides. We are vulnerable. One tsunami, one tsunami and our whole country will disappear.”

Already, there is less and less of Kiribati for its inhabitants. The coastline is regularly being lost to king tides and to creeping sea levels, and in a very real sense, there is nowhere to go.

The loss of land is causing conflict – Tarawa is growing ever more densely crowded, as families living on the coastline are forced inwards, infringing on another’s claim.

The next round of multinational climate talks in November – COP 23 – will be chaired by Fiji, and is expected to swing particular focus of the global climate debate to the Pacific, where comparatively minuscule amounts of carbon are produced, but the effects of climate change have been felt first, and most acutely.

Assuming the COP presidency, the Fijian prime minister, Frank Bainimarama, said he would “bring a particular perspective to these negotiations on behalf of some of those who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change – Pacific Islanders and the residents of other small island developing states and low-lying areas of the world”.

From left, Erietera Aram from Tarawa, Kiribati; Mangila Kilifi from Kiribati; and Saineta Sioni from Funafuti, Tuvalu.
But the islands’ fight to be saved was everybody’s, Bainimarama said.

“Our concerns are the concerns of the entire world, given the scale of this crisis.”

Aram and compatriots from Kiribati and fellow low-lying islanders from Tuvalu are travelling with the Edmund Rice Centre, a social justice group, across Australia. They have met politicians, unions, coalminers, and officials from the CSIRO and power stations “and we think they have heard our stories, they understand how serious this is”.

Recent reports from groups as disparate as the World Bank, the Menzies Research Centre and the Lowy Institute have suggested allowing open-access migration from Pacific Islands to Australia as a more effective economic stimulus than aid, and as a strategy for coping with the impacts of climate change, which are already beginning to see islands across the Pacific lost to the sea.

In April, the former US deputy undersecretary of defence Sherri Goodman visited Australia, and said the Pacific was “right in disaster alley” and the region would be “on the frontlines” of widespread forced migration caused by climate.

The issue of a mass migration is a contentious one for the Pacific Islands facing annihilation under the waves. Many islanders are resistant, but understand it may be inevitable.

“We don’t want to leave our country,” Aram says. “We love our land, and it doesn’t have the same meaning to be living somewhere else. We don’t want to be migrants of climate, but if there is no change our country will disappear into the sea.”

It feels terrible, he says, to worry about one’s country’s very existence.
“What will happen to my children’s country, that’s why I worry. What am I leaving behind? We are the voice of the children of these vulnerable countries.”

Aso Ioapo from Tuvalu says “migration is the last option of the Tuvaluan people”.

“Our history and our culture are very important to us, and we believe that this is the place we are supposed to be. We don’t want to lose that, we don’t want to lose who we are.”

Tuvalu has had an increasing number of cyclones, of greater intensity, over recent years. In 2015, Cyclone Pam sent massive waves washing over some entire islands. About 45% of the country’s 10,000 population was displaced, the government said.

“The cyclones are occurring more regularly, and they are more powerful now,” Ioapo said.

“We have to face that we might have to go to another place. That is hard. But migration is the last option. We want to save our countries.”