US called on to give permanent rights to Marshallese climate migrants

Their colonial, nuclear past means the US must guarantee full rights to the Marshallese, says Frank Bainimarama, who also launched a broadside at the G20

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The Fijian prime minister has called on the US to open its borders and offer a permanent home to the population of the Marshall Islands, which is threatened by rising seas.

Speaking at a meeting of the Climate Action Pacific Partnership in the Fijian capital of Suva, Frank Bainimarama told low-lying Pacific states “even if the battle to keep your islands above the water is lost, we will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you. Fiji has offered to give permanent refuge to the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu, our closest neighbours under threat”.

He called on the US to do the same for the Marshall Islands, which the US held as a territory for almost four decades after World War II and used as a testing ground for 67 nuclear weapons tests.

“We expect the United States to do the same for the people of the Marshall Islands – who share your plight – because of their long-standing historical ties,” said Bainimarama.
The highest point on the Marshall islands lies just a few metres above sea level, making it among the most vulnerable nations on earth to rising seas.

Currently about 20,000 Marshallese live in the US. Almost a third of the official population of the islands.

The US and the islands have a compact of free association, which allows Marshall Islanders to emigrate to the US. But the deal, which was beaten out partly as compensation for the destruction and irradiation of several atolls, ends in 2023. There is no guarantee it will be extended.

Bainimarama will be the president of the UN climate conference in Bonn later this year. This role grants the Fijians and their Pacific island neighbours a strong platform for their calls for sharp carbon emissions cuts, the only thing that can save some atoll nations from becoming unliveable.

In his speech, Bainimarama also called on the leaders of the G20 – which contains the world’s biggest, most advanced economies – to not only meet the commitments they have made to the Paris climate agreement, but to “go a lot further, because what we have all committed so far is simply not enough to deal effectively with the scale of the crisis the world is facing”.

The G20 meets this week in Hamburg, Germany, and leaders from Europe are reportedly preparing for a showdown with US president Donald Trump over climate change. Trump wants to withdraw his country from the agreement and ‘renegotiate’ it on the basis that it is unfair to the US.

On Monday, Bainimarama said: “We have not caused this crisis, your nations have… We have trodden lightly on the earth whereas you have trodden heavily. And those carbon footprints pose a threat to us in the Pacific and to all humanity.

“The vulnerable nations expect you to genuinely work towards the objectives you agreed to in the Paris Agreement – to keep global temperatures well below 2 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial level and pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5 degrees.”