

The Carteret Islands: First man-made climate change evacuees still await resettlement

Dubbed by many as the world's first climate change refugees, the people of the six low-lying Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea have welcomed more than their fair share of curious but well-meaning researchers, journalists and film crew over the past few years. With rising sea levels and the threat to the islands from storm surges (the so-called king tides), their regional government made world news back in 2007 when it took the decision to relocate the islands' 2,700 population to the larger Papua New Guinea island of Bougainville. Now at the end of 2010, and in the week that governments, representatives and environmental lobbyists converge on Cancun to debate a new climate deal, only two Carteret families have successfully relocated the 100 km (62 miles) to the 'mainland'; the rest of the population remain on the islands, afraid of the encroaching seas.

They have much to fear. The highest point of this atoll chain is just 1.2m (less than 5ft) above sea level and data collected for the South Pacific Sea Level and Climate Monitoring Project indicate that this part of the Pacific has recorded some of the largest year-on-year increases in sea levels over the last two decades. The last king tide to affect the Carteret Islands in 2008 completely inundated the main island of Han, home to more than 1500 people. Its community with nowhere to escape could only watch from the centre of the island as the seas washed away their homes. Rufina Moi, a retired teacher, and a spokes person for the community, expressed her fears: "I am really afraid of the ocean because when strong storms come you can see the waves and the island is very small now."

Storm surges are not the only threat to the community's day-to-day survival. Over the last twenty years or so the invasion of salt water from the rising seas has destroyed the islanders' crops. Previously they were able to grow beans, greens, yams and swampy taro. Today there are no kitchen gardens, the breadfruit trees are dying and the islanders' diet consists almost entirely of coconuts and fish. Last month the community received its first emergency shipment of food supplies since June. Each person received only one and a half bags of flour. No one knows when the next aid will arrive. Lynette Roberts, an island resident, confided: 'We appear happy, but we were starving before last week's supplies arrived.'

Two agencies, the Bougainville Autonomous Regional Government and Tulele Peisa, a local community-based organisation dedicated to the relocation, are working independently in the resettlement process. For both organisations, land ownership issues and accessing suitable finances have proved critical factors in the relocation.

The Bougainville authority has received 2 million kina (about £575,000) from the national government and they are close to securing 600 hectares of land at Karoola, an hour's drive west of the town of Buka on Buka Island. The first 40 Carteret families have been selected and will move as soon as houses have been constructed, hopefully sometime next year. Ephraim Eminioni, the co-ordinator of the resettlement programme for the regional government, pointed out: 'The resettlement process is not just about what we [the government] can put in, but also about what we can assist the Carteret people in bringing along'.

Tulele Peisa, working at a smaller scale, was given 71-hectares by the Catholic Church at Tinputz on the larger island of Bougainville. The community-based organisation has to raise funds locally for the construction of homes, and to date, only two houses have been built at a cost of 27,000 kina

(£7,500) each. A third house is nearing completion. Ursula Rasoka, the Executive Director of the organisation, argued: 'Tulele Peisa should receive a share of the resettlement funds provided by the national government'. At the moment the organisation is entirely reliant on local donations which means that the development of the Tinputz site is slow.

The majority of Carteret islanders, therefore, still await an opportunity to leave their island homes, and they are frustrated with their situation. In the past visitors to the Carteret atolls were welcomed by the community as the islanders believed that publicising their plight to the outside world would bring much needed help. No assistance has so far appeared and the islanders no longer welcome casual onlookers.

Thomas Hirsch, Senior Climate Change Policy Advisor for Bread for the World, the development arm of the German Protestant Church, comments: 'As yet the issue of climate-induced migration has not received the serious attention it deserves. By not assisting the Carteret islanders, we might be denying them their most fundamental human right, to survive. Their lives are threatened by the next king tide. We call on state authorities to address this issue urgently in order to avoid a human catastrophe, not just on the Carteret islands but also on many more low-lying atolls.'

The people of the Carteret Islands may be the first entire population to move because of man-made climate change, but they will not be the last, assuming that future sea level rise predictions prove accurate. Over the coming years the populations of entire island nations, such as Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Maldives, will be under threat from the rising seas.

Fei Tevi, General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches, GS quote...

The number of people affected in the Pacific is 'a drop in the ocean' compared with the estimated 250 million people globally who will face climate-induced resettlement by 2050. Nevertheless, we as publicists and perpetrators of their plight have a responsibility and duty of care to those communities already making our climate-change headlines. This is more than a story, and we are more than story tellers; this is reality for the people of the Carteret Islands, a community who are awaiting our help.

Julia Edwards is a Mission Partner with the Methodist Church UK, and will be serving as a researcher for the Pacific Conference of Churches on climate change and resettlement within the Pacific region. She wishes to thank Bread for the World, Germany for the opportunity to accompany them to the Carteret Islands in November 2010.