

A CLIMATIC HELL ... IN PARADISE EMERGENCY CALL FOR THE FIRST CLIMATIC REFUGEES

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Space view of Iolassa island in Carterets atoll as obtained with Google Earth

As seen from the space, some islands of Pacific area appear as these small paradises that most of us have seen only on postcards; their populations have a legendary hospitality and an incommensurate kindness. However, when looking more carefully, a true nightmare is happening to some of them, with the complete collapse of their environment, ignored by our public opinion.

For these populations of Pacific islands, the anxiety is indeed already the every-day life: they have to face the concrete consequences of a concept that, for the public opinion, is still an abstraction: the sea level increasing due to global warming and to the melting of considerable quantities of ices. Already more than a decade ago, the scientific prediction was given, for this type of event and it actually occurs now, unfortunately.

What is the situation nowadays? The demoniac angels have appeared first in the paradise of Carteret islands, in Papua New Guinea, under the form of sea level rise, storms and floods over the lands. These idyllic south pacific islands have thus rapidly experienced a great disaster.

120 km northeast of mainland Bougainville, the Carterets are six small islands around an atoll about 25 km across. They are about 1m above high tide and made of sand. All six islands have been damaged. In 1995 a wave washed away most of the shorelines of Piul and Huene islands. Han island was then totally inundated and another was cut in half by the sea. The inhabitants have a very hard life. Some homes are regularly washed away.

Since several years (and events now accelerate) the erosion of the costs increases. The area of the islands diminishes, and as the sea level rises, salt water is invading the land the inhabitants have for cultivation. They are now forced to survive on coconuts, fish, and occasional food supplies from outside, whereas they used to grow tropical fruits and vegetables in gardens, today unusable. A terrible situation of malnutrition has spread and, now that wells are contaminated with salted water, even drinking water is a problem. Thus, water is now collected from rain, and when the rain-water is exhausted, the only drinkable liquid is from coconuts. For some years the islanders, who have nearly no money, have depended on emergency aid, arriving at random since without any air service, a government boat goes there only few times a year.

This situation, characterized by the increasing number of swamps with brackish water led to the appearance and extension of mosquitoes and their natural consequence: malaria.

Hunger, malnutrition, insecurity, anxiety for entire populations are unexpected consequences of the greenhouse effect. This shows that any problem concerning environment must be treated in a multidisciplinary approach, considering fully the human dimensions. This is a lesson for forthcoming similar situations in several other places in the world that will be submitted to the problem of rising waters.

But besides talks, what is the short term solution for the inhabitants of these pacific islands? What is proposed? Which countries or international organisms have reacted, to save these people?

The answer is sad and unacceptable: whereas the contribution of these populations to the greenhouse gas emission is zero, whereas their ecological footprint is zero (there is no car on these islands, no use of fossile fuels except for a small electric generator working few hours a month for a DVD player), no solution is proposed! Schematically, what is said to them is "leave your sinking islands if you don't want to die", but no real means for that are available.

Can we, if we pretend to be humans, leave these innocent populations alone facing the force of Ocean? Can we pretend now to ignore their situation?

The fate of the Carteret islands inhabitants, and soon the fate of the inhabitants of other low-lying islands (Tuvalu, Kirabati, Fiji, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Marshalls, etc) will prefigure the fate that will be reserved to any one that will have to be confronted to ecological disasters: either there will be an international action to help them, or they will disappear either as humans or as groups.

Such an event, that can be named genocide, would be a shame for any human being on the surface of our small planet.

The 1951 International Convention on Refugees does not include people displaced by a changed climate, such as rising seas, expanding deserts and shrinking ice. In the neighboring Australia, Senator Christine Milne of the Australian Greens tried to change this. She proposed a motion, that the government should use its influence in the U.N. in order that people displaced by consequences of global warming can be recognized as refugees. Both major parties voted against and Australia will not accept such refugees in its wide territory.

"Unless people can be relocated as a group we run the risk of people losing their languages and becoming socially, culturally and economically isolated, said representants of Carteret's islanders. If the convention could be expanded to recognize climate refugees, then resettlement could be done in a way that keeps language and culture together".

An estimation is given, that a 2 degrees rise in temperature could create at least 100 millions refugees by the end of the century. On the basis of scientific estimations, the Canadian environment Minister, David Anderson has warned that "if climate goes unchecked

there could be 500 millions refugees created in one human lifetime".

Ignored by the other nations, the nations of these pacific islands have the feeling that they are victims of something that they are not responsible for. A lot of inhabitants of these islands claim they love their island and they are prepared to die there...

Why is the international community not more active with respect to this problem? This question merits interrogation. Does this innocent population, so full of kindness, not attract the international sympathy? Or is it because what is happening is the cruel result of a situation that was not yet recognized few years ago, namely the global warming?... whose expected consequences are already happening, thus confirming scientific predictions? Is there a fear to panic our public opinions? Or is this because these populations are far away from the world decision centers?

Whatever the cause of the silence and of the lack of action, it is highly time to wake up and to act.

Human rights exist also for the inhabitants of Pacific islands!

Call for solidarity towards Carteret islanders

Pacific islanders need concrete solutions with respect to the cruel problem they are facing. All aspects of helps are needed: financial supports to provide them with food and medicaments, financial supports to allow them to relocate to other places.

As scientists, we have also the possibility to help them with expertizes and scientific studies of what is happening there.

Whereas some countries build completely artificial islands, larger than Carteret's islands, whereas other ones build dams in much more extended regions, why would the international community be unable to finance and organize backfilling and construction of dams for stopping the floods and making islands of Pacific inhabitable?

We call all scientists over the world, having a conscience, to join an action in favour of the inhabitants of these islands.

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