

Extracted from the paper delivered by **Agnes Henson-Derby**

KIRIBATI AND GLOBAL WARMING

I came to live in the UK nearly 30 years ago. People often ask me where I came from, and I am always proud to say – Kiribati. Of course, this is usually followed by a small lesson on geography. I am often asked in amazement: “How can you leave your beautiful country and come and live in this cold climate ?” (mind you, I only get this sort of question in the winter or on rainy summer days!) That issue never bothered me, as I knew that I could go back again to visit Kiribati anytime.

When I am older and greyer I won't be able to go and visit my ancestral homeland, as it will be swallowed up by the sea. The land of Kiribati is only two metres above mean sea level, and it will be the first victim of rising sea levels.

The ominous signs are already gathering. Coconut trees are dying because the land is becoming saline. Sea defences are being breached and each high tide constantly threatens by family's house and livelihood.

When the ocean overwhelms our land:

- What will happen to our people ?
- Where will they go ?
- How can we call ourselves I-Kiribati or Tuvaluans without our country to identify with ?
- Will my proud and independent people end their days in squalid refugee centres out of reach of our beloved sea, living on handouts ?

The loss of the small, innocent atoll nations in the Pacific and the Indian Oceans is a direct consequence of the pollution caused by the cash-based polluting economies of the industrialised nations. We are being crushed by the bulldozers of the American, Chinese, Russian, Japanese and other rich polluting nations who are destroying our world.

The Kiribati government is putting this issue – the destruction of their land and people – at the top of the agenda.

To quote: “The issue of global warming is a foreign policy with top priority for the Government of Kiribati specifically, for all governments to ratify and implement the Kyoto Treaty”.

Wishful thinking... I doubt if our voice will be heard by President Bush and the oil companies. They probably don't care as they have mountains to live on. Global warming isn't affecting them yet, and we are insignificant people in a land which no one can actually locate – even more so when they disappear.

However, in terms of immediate practical steps, there is not a lot that the Government of Kiribati can do.

The scientific consensus seems to be that the sea level will eventually rise by some 1.8 metres. It is not possible to make predictions as to whether (and more importantly, when) the fringing reefs around the atolls in Kiribati and elsewhere may be overwhelmed by ocean storms.

It is, thus, premature to talk of evacuating Kiribati and I don't get the impression that this is an issue of great public debate in the country itself. If the worst comes to the worst, experts predict that we are talking about being able to live on Kiribati at least for another 50 years. The government of Kiribati has not had any discussions about the resettling of the Kiribati people elsewhere, nor is there evidence that most people want to be resettled. So any assurances of "help" from Australia or elsewhere, if they exist, are secret. In any case, what sort of life will the average Islander have in such a place. One only has to look at the fate of the Aborigines...

It is heartbreaking to see the complacency of the "developed" countries, who are causing global warming, especially when only four per cent of the world's population cause 28 per cent of its pollution. This minority of polluters refuse to change their policies and way of life to reduce carbon dioxide and other emissions.

The sad irony is that Kiribati was the first country to greet the new millennium, yet will not see the last sunset of the next millennium. Two islands have already disappeared under the sea. Some say it has nothing to do with global warming, but caused by natural processes. I cannot help but believe that global warming has a hand in their disappearance.

My appeal to you all is please try and do as much as you can to help save our countries, our cultures, our uniqueness, and our lives.

The following poem was written by Sam Derby when he was ten years old:

Global warming is coming
Quicker and quicker, always storming,
Soon it will hit Kiribati
But after that there'll be nothing left for us.

Global warming comes fast but steady
But no one will be ready,
Please do something
So that the birds will sing,
Now start thinking
Because Kiribati is sinking.