



## **CLIMATE JUSTICE AND LOSS AND DAMAGE IN THE PACIFIC CONFERENCE**

### **OPENING ADDRESS**

#### **ACTING PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR FINANCE OF FIJI, HON. Professor BIMAN PRASAD**

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University of Sydney

UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, Professor Surya Deva.

Excellencies

Senior Officials

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am grateful for the opportunity to address you all today. I thank Professor Surya Deva and the Sydney Environment Institute for convening this conference.

When I speak of climate change in Pacific to non-Pacific audiences – our reality often seems too far away physically; our challenge appear to them to be too far into future; and the need for answers and responses even further away in future. This is changing but we are not winning in changing outside Pacific public's understanding of the scale and dimensions of the impacts of climate change across the Pacific. So I welcome opportunities like this to engage with outside audiences more directly.

How do we bring the lived reality of many Pacific islands to for example Sydney siders in a way that makes sense to them in a personal way. Let me make a bad effort to do so. Imagine owning a house in one of the low-lying areas either on the coasts or close to your rivers. You may have bought your house 20 years ago for \$750,000. It may be worth well over \$2 million today. 20 years ago, you may have been paying an annual house insurance of \$1000 per year. Your annual home maintenance costs may have been \$2-3000.

Let me now transpose a Pacific context onto that reality. Imagine instead of appreciation in value of your house, its price had stayed flat over these few decades because it is in harms way from sea level rise. Imagine an increase in annual insurance from \$1000 to \$10,000 annually by today. Imagine a context where your annual maintenance costs had increased from \$2-3000 to \$20-30,000 annually. This may be your story in future. This is the Pacific's story today.

I know that the conversations about climate change often take place in echo chambers. We talk to those who think like us. This must change.

The World has become more complicated. Our citizens – here in Australia and across the Pacific look to their governments to give them hope. Hope without feasible solutions is madness. The absence of feasible solutions is a fertile ground for fear-mongers and for sowing discontent in government and institutions of democracy. This is hugely relevant to my framing of discussions on human rights within the context of loss and damage.

Chair, allow me to make some observations about recent developments internationally.

Fiji and indeed the Pacific are deeply disappointed that President Trump has withdrawn the USA from the Paris Treaty. The Prime Ministers of Fiji, Samoa and PNG have written to the US President to reconsider this decision. Fiji's Prime Minister has taken the Pacific's message directly to the White House last week and is urging the US to reconsider this decision.

I have deep faith in US scientists. Some of the greatest universities in the World are in America. Some of the greatest scholars in the world work in these great American universities. The greatest scientists in the world, working in the greatest universities in the world tell the world in unanimity - that human- induced climate change is the greatest threat our planet faces. I believe them.

USA's greatness to lead the World has always been on the back of its science, its enterprise and its exceptional genius. And I know that these will remain available to the rest of the World as we tackle the gravest shared threat to our planet – with or without the support of its own Government.

The Pacific Islands perspective on climate change is unambiguous. Climate change will remain the greatest challenge to the peace, security and well-being of Pacific Islanders. This perspective will not change because of elections in the US or anywhere else.

Countries that have contributed to global warming bear responsibility for the World breaching the 1.5 Celsius temperature goal.

The 1.5 degree Celsius is the Pacific's guardrail. We say this for a reason. When you breach 1.5 Celsius, we lose the window to adapt. What lies beyond 1.5 temperature increase across the Pacific is wholesome loss and damage.

A withdrawal from Paris does not absolve USA of its historical responsibilities. Great countries take responsibility for their actions. The climate debt that the US owes Pacific Islanders is held in trust.

At this inflection point, two trends stand out. First is that the global temperature increase and the rise of sea level is occurring at a much faster than predicted rate.

This means that the scale of loss and damages is increasing exponentially – not incrementally as we had earlier assumed.

The second concerning trend is the growing discontent in many countries about taking responsibility for their contributions to greenhouse gas emissions. This is worrisome as we are all finding out.

The protection and advancement of the human rights of Pacific islanders is dependent on substantive progress on responding to loss and damage. This is not a question about resources alone. This is also a question about the political will to do more and to do more that much faster.

Will the 2030 NDCs announced this year collectively deliver a pathway to keeping global average temperature rise below 1.5 degrees? This is critical human rights question. If we fail to return to a stable 1.5 C – it means that the rights of communities to their homelands, to their livelihoods, to their cultural and national identity stand to be violated substantially.

We have an important challenge ahead, therefore. Will the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage deliver a credible modality for responding to the array of specific localised manifestations of climate driven loss and damage? Our answer to that must be resounding yes.

Island states of the Blue Pacific, its civil society and especially its young have led the push to secure an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the legal basis of these issues. It is critical to ascertain the degree to which international law is equipped and positioned to tackle climate change not just as an environmental issue but critically as a human rights issue.

The transboundary harm caused by climate change cannot be separated in its understanding from the other transboundary threats that are regulated and enforced through international law.

I thank the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development, Professor Surya Deva, for the important report provided to the 79<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly on Climate justice and loss and damage in the context of the right to development.

The 12 overarching principles presented in the report which include intergenerational equity, the *polluter pays* principle, and common but differentiated responsibilities lay out the legal parameters that must be integrated into global responses to climate change and loss and damage in order to ensure human rights are adequately protected.

The report is clear - climate change *will* continue to negatively affect all dimensions of development. Climate change is the major threat to human rights of people, communities and whole populations across the Blue Pacific.

Climate change restricts our development progress. Much of our national debt is a climate debt, that is, debt undertaken to rebuild bridges and roads that are washed away by extreme weather events.

While the adverse impact of disaster events on our public finances, our enduring capacity gaps, and our remoteness are well understood, what is less well understood is the non-economic loss and damage to our natural assets and cultural heritage.

Damage to our reefs, fisheries, terrestrial and marine biodiversity has direct and outsized impacts on the livelihoods of thousands. These impacts are felt through elevated levels of food insecurity. They are felt through destruction of livelihoods based on the ocean economy.

The impacts on the culture, traditional practices that have supported Pacific's sustainability and habitability for generations are profound.

When we relocate communities away from their homelands, what we cannot do is relocate their fishing rights. We cannot relocate their traditional lands. These are fixed to the specific geography that a community calls its home. How do we allocate an economic cost to this.

When a community is dispersed across the whole population because its homeland is no longer habitable – in time, the community stands to lose its language, its culture, its traditions. How do we price this?

Over the last few years, the concept of loss and damage has thankfully transitioned from being on the peripheries of international discussion to its centre stage.

Progress on loss and damage must result in significantly expanded pool of climate finance as agreed at COP28. Recent developments on climate finance have delivered positive outcomes for debt management, asset protection especially through innovative financing instruments such as parametric insurance, and through prepositioning finance for recovery from sudden onset events such as through PICRIC.

What must follow these essential first steps is a large scale expansion of climate finance to include intractable damage to nature, and to the intangible elements arising from relocation of communities, dispersal of relocated communities, loss of language, burial grounds and cultural assets.

The effort to bring a comprehensive approach to addressing loss and damage is complex.

For decades we have engaged in a narrative that focuses on preventing and minimising the impacts of climate change through mitigation and adaptation. We know too well that too many communities lie beyond the scope of adaptation. It is plainly too late for so many Pacific communities. So we must evolve our approach to adaptation. The international loss and damage facility will need to evolve as well.

We can only address a problem when you understand the essence of the problem. In this case the problem is clear – climate change creates loss and damage. Loss and damage is experienced by communities without any regard for national borders. The harm caused by one country's emissions cannot be directly attributed to a specific country's loss and damage. That is why we have a global approach to this.

The Pacific has played a significant role in advocating for concerted action to address climate-driven loss and damage since the 1990s. Our negotiation teams have played a leadership role in shaping the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage through the Transitional Committee.

We have been persistent in advocating for a nationally led and country-owned approach. This is what differentiates the Loss and Damage Fund from other multi-lateral climate funds.

At the heart of this concept is the recognition that specific responses to loss and damage are best shaped and determined at the local level. Locally led and driven efforts to define, quantify (if possible) and propose solutions to loss and damage works well when done within a strong national framework. The response must be persistent. It must be sustained.

Ad-hoc donor support, stop-start approaches to donor support, short term projects, and excessive use of third-party actors is a recipe for disaster. This cannot and will not be our future.

The loss and damage that results from ad hoc and stop and start approaches is almost as equally fatal as the underlying loss and damage itself. This is our message to the world.

We therefore cannot allow significant amounts of financing available to support national response to loss and damage to be eaten up by third-party implementing entities. Funding that is meant for communities experiencing loss and damage must go to those communities. Period.

Fiji will work constructively with the Board of the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage to ensure what the fund delivers, its appetite for risk, its responsiveness, and operability is distinct from other mechanisms.

The Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage is a different fund – we get it. It is my hope that other countries get this. My expectation is that policy experts in national Treasuries and Foreign Affairs will get this as well. We have a lot of work ahead.

Parties agreed for the first time at COP28 to make explicit reference to fossil fuels – the main driver of climate change. Climate change is the most fundamental threat to protection and advancement of human rights of Pacific Islanders, its women, its disabled, its poor and its vulnerable. We know that. You know that too.

The unabated use of fossil fuels fundamentally undermines the fundamental human rights of Pacific Islanders. The ‘drill-baby-drill’ mantra is a call for industrial scale increases in the breaches of the fundamental human rights of Pacific Islanders.

Multi-lateral development banks and private sector investments cannot present themselves as institutions invested in delivering climate resilient development and fund fossil fuel expansion concurrently. This nightmare has to end.

The private sector cannot continue to reap the benefits of fossil fuel subsidies and be expected to benefit from and lead the technological and economic transition. The human rights consequences of these approaches has to come into the centre stage of investment policy decision making – this cannot be an afterthought.

The Pacific region is well off track in its efforts to achieve the 17 SDG goals. Well off track. In fact, it is more off track than any other region. The primary reason for this is the growing impacts of climate change.

Dramatic shifts in rainfall patterns have regressed their performance against Goal 6 – clean water and sanitation.

Despite our leadership and the huge proportion of government capacity invested in climate action, the Pacific has shown signs of regression against Goal 13 – climate action itself. This reflects the worsening climate financing gap that the Blue Pacific faces in a context of escalating climate crisis.

The insidious nature of loss and damage in the Pacific is evident across the different island contexts and cultures. Efforts to relocate vulnerable communities in Solomon Islands, PNG and Fiji out of harms way through planned relocation operations is just one element of this.

Salt water intrusion threatens Pacific agriculture in Samoa, Tonga, and across this region. The proliferation of invasive species that thrive in the higher temperatures across Melanesia and including the PNG highlands impacts on food security and is a reason for increasing rates of stunting.

The impacts of prolonged drought on national health, on health systems and on health service delivery across Micronesia is a wake up call.

My core message to this Conference today is discussions on loss and damage must begin from the premise that the right to development is an inalienable right.

The right to development is an inalienable right that must be enjoyed by all Australians, all Americans and people across the developed world. This right cannot be denied to people in the developed world. Equally, the right to development is a right that cannot be denied to Pacific islanders.

Ladies and gentlemen

The window for adaption is closing fast across the Pacific. What lies beyond adaptation is outright loss and damage. That is a future that we – Government's; our civil society and our communities must begin to prepare for on a war footing. A sufficiently resourced Fund for Loss and Damage is a crucial part of our toolkit. Our international human rights advocacy is another crucial part of our toolkit.

We need to be unambiguous in promoting an international understanding that investment decisions taken by rich countries, that economic strategies such as fossil fuel subsidies pose fundamental threats to the enjoyment of human rights of Pacific Islanders.

This climate colonialism must end.

I thank you.