

## **The Most Touching Intervention During the First Week here in Copenhagen**

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On November 9<sup>th</sup> 2009, negotiations at the UN climate summit in Copenhagen dramatically broke down after a split between ‘developing’ countries who favoured a new protocol and others who wished to continue with the legally binding Kyoto agreement. The crisis was partly precipitated by revelations that the host nation, Denmark was proposing another negotiating mechanism which would sideline, if not kill off, the Kyoto Protocol.

In response, Tuvalu, an island nation in the Pacific which is threatened by a rise in sea-levels, proposed a new treaty which would force deeper global emission cuts on rich, industrialized nations, but could also lead to emerging economies, such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa having to make serious cuts also. Needless to say, the nations that would have to make the cuts did not support the Tuvalu call, hence the split. Many other economically poor countries such as Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago and several African states supported Tuvalu. As a result of Tuvalu’s intervention one of the two negotiating tracks of the Convention of the Parties (COP) was suspended for several hours as no consensus could be reached.

Civil society groups, many of them members of the Climate Action Network (CAN), supported Tuvalu even though they are aware of the risk of collapsing the whole process. A front page article in the December 10, 2009, of the CAN paper, called ECO, issued this praise: “Tuvalu’s proposal for an open and transparent process, such as a Contact Group, serves as a ray of sunshine in an otherwise cloudy and dark city.”

The most telling speech for me during week one of this Convention on Climate Change came from the Tuvalu negotiator when he returned to the COP on Friday morning. He put words to what many of us are thinking. This is ultimately not about money, or economic power - it is about survival. I taped his speech. What follows is a slightly edited version of what he said.

“Madam President, thank you for allowing me to take the floor. During the last couple of days there has been lots of interest in this agenda item. There have been lots of discussions about how to proceed with this process and lots of media interest in this agenda item. In some media it has been presented as if Tuvalu has been trying to embarrass the Danish government over this issue. I wish to make it

perfectly clear that this is not our intention. We know very well your sincerity and your dedication to coming to a meaningful outcome in Copenhagen. You have given an enormous amount of time travelling the world, discussing with leaders how to come to an acceptable conclusion to this item. We know that the Danes have a strong history of travelling the world. In fact, there are people in Tuvalu who have Danish names.

Unfortunately, you (Madam President) never made it to Tuvalu, though I think you tried. If you had made it to Tuvalu you would realise why we are concerned about this issue. The entire population of Tuvalu lives below two metres above sea level. The highest point above sea-level, in the entire nation of Tuvalu is only four metres.

Madam President we are not naive about the political difficulties that lie before us. It appears that we are waiting for some senators in the US Congress to conclude [a Climate Bill] before we can consider this issue properly. It is an irony of the modern world that the fate of the world is being determined by some senators in the U.S. Congress. We note that President Obama recently went to Norway to pick up a Nobel Prize for Peace. We can suggest that, for him to honour this Nobel Prize, he should address the greatest threat to humanity that we have before us - climate change. It is also the greatest threat to security. So I make a strong plea to work for legally binding treaties here in Copenhagen.

Madam President, this is not merely an issue for Tuvalu. Pacific Islands countries Kiribati and the Marshall Island, countries in the Caribbean – Haiti, Bahamas and Granada, in Africa – San Tome and poor countries, such as Mali, Uganda and millions of other people around this world, are affected enormously by climate change. This is not just (an issue for) Tuvalu. During the past two days I have received calls from all over the world, offering faith and hope that we can come to a meaningful conclusion on these issues.

Madam President, this is not just an ego-trip for me. I have refused to do media interviews because this is not an ego-trip for me. I am just a humble and insignificant employee of the Ministry of the Environment in Tuvalu. And as a humble servant of the government I have to make a strong plea to you that we can consider this matter properly. I don't want to cause embarrassment to you or the Danish government. I clearly wish to put before the leaders a legally binding (agreement) which they can sign up to this week. I make this as a strong and passionate plea. We have had our proposal on the table for six months, not two days (as is being implied). I woke up this morning and I was crying and that is not

easy for a grown man to admit. The fate of my country rests in your hands. Thank you.” (He broke down at the end of his speech.)

So, where does this leave the process for week two? On Saturday, December 12, 2009, I met an Irish negotiator who is a veteran of the COP process. We first met in Nairobi in 2006. I asked him how the negotiators were going to get the process back on track for this week. He said that there would be a lot of horse-trading during the weekend, but even so, it is going to be very difficult to hammer something out in a week. But, on the other hand, he pointed out that almost 100 leaders of different countries will be arriving this week. Among them will be Presidents Sarkozy of France, Medvedev of Russia and Obama of the U.S., Prime Ministers Brown of Britain, Merkel of Germany and Wei Jiabao of China. None of these would relish being part of a massive political failure on such an important topic. This pressure might be enough to impel them to sign a robust treaty. I hope he is right.