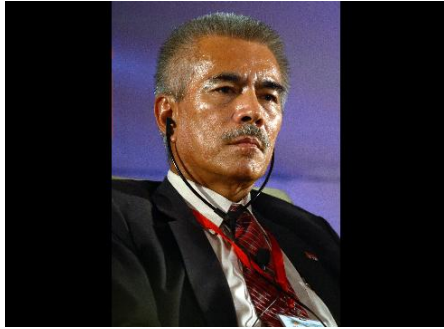


Kiribati Islanders Seek Land to Buy as Rising Seas Threaten

[Email](#) | [Print](#) | [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

By [bn:PRSN=1] Subramaniam Sharma []



Feb. 9 (Bloomberg) -- Kiribati, a Pacific island-nation in danger of being submerged because of global warming, may purchase land elsewhere to relocate its people, President Anote Tong said.

“We would consider buying land,” Tong said in an interview in New Delhi. “The alternative is that we die, we go extinct.” [Kiribati](#), between Hawaii and Australia, is the second island-nation after the Maldives that’s floated the idea of buying land should their islands be swamped by rising seas and more powerful storms.

Warmer temperatures are melting icecaps, expanding the volume of oceans and causing more intense storm systems. Higher tides in Kiribati’s 33-island archipelago are making potable water for its 100,000 residents too salty to drink. Tong appealed Feb. 5 to leaders who will meet in Copenhagen in December to turn their attention to islanders hurt by global warming.

“I can fully understand why responsible leaders of countries like Kiribati and the Maldives want to take action now and I think we’ll see more of this,” said [Kim Carstensen](#), climate-change program director for the environmental group WWF International.

Increasingly, “we’re facing a situation where hundreds of millions of people will be at risk from the consequences of climate change in the form of rising sea levels for small island-states and low-lying countries like Bangladesh,” Carstensen said Feb. 6 in a telephone interview from Copenhagen.

“We are the face of the victims,” Tong said. “There has to be an international commitment that those countries that are willing to provide land will be compensated and a fund will be provided. But we will be willing to spend our own money if nothing else was coming forth.”

Rising Seas

The United Nations has called on 192 countries to negotiate a new climate-protection treaty to be signed in Denmark. The UN [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) has predicted sea

levels will rise 18 to 59 centimeters (7 inches to two feet) by 2100, having climbed 17 centimeters during the last century. The panel also said tropical cyclones likely will increase in intensity.

Islands in the Pacific like Kiribati are vulnerable because many of them are low-lying atolls only a few meters above sea level. [Kiribati](#), much of it no higher than five meters above the ocean, has 1,143 kilometers of coastline and 21 inhabited islands.

The sea level around Kiribati, the [former Gilbert Islands](#), has been rising 5.1 millimeters a year since 1991, Australia's National Tidal Centre [reported](#).

People have been steadily moving their homes back from the shoreline as the sea level [rises](#), said Tong, in India for a conference on sustainable development that ended Feb. 7.

“There is inundation of our shoreline,” Tong said. “The high tide with moderately strong winds has resulted in sea water coming into the soft water. It has affected food crops.”

Emigrating Islanders

The government is now training its people with skills such as plumbing to help them find jobs overseas as world demand for coconut affects its economy. Fish and seaweed are among its main exports. New Zealand is among the areas its people go now for work.

“Until the global economic crisis, we were hopeful that we can penetrate the labor market in different countries,” Tong said. “We are looking at a solution that allows our people to live with dignity and not as second-class citizens.”

Tong, who holds a masters degree from the London School of Economics, was elected Kiribati president in 2003 and re-elected in 2007. The country won independence from the U.K. in 1979.

To contact the reporter on this story: [Subramaniam Sharma](#) in New Delhi at ssharma@bloomberg.net

Last Updated: February 8, 2009 18:01 EST