

Pacific Region

Introduction

The Pacific Islands¹ are home to a diverse range of indigenous peoples speaking 19 per cent of the world's estimated 5,000 languages. Indigenous peoples in the Pacific are still linked to their communal lands, belief systems, spirituality and customary laws which forms the basis of their social, economic and political systems.

Due to the diversity of Pacific countries and territories, there are significant variations in the social, political and economic situation of indigenous peoples in the region. The small developing States of the Pacific face specific environmental, social and economic challenges that have significant impacts on indigenous peoples exercising their human rights.

One distinctive feature of the Pacific region is that indigenous peoples make up the majority in most Pacific Island countries. At the same time in some countries in the Pacific region, colonial settlements and immigration has reduced the indigenous population to a minority in their own lands such as the Kanaks of Kanaky/New Caledonia who make up 44 per cent of the population; the Kanaka Maoli of Hawaii (18 per cent); the Maori of Aotearoa/New Zealand (15 per cent); the Chamorro of Guam (14 per cent) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia (2 per cent).

When most States adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, Australia and New Zealand were two of the four dissenting States. Among the 11 overall abstentions was a Pacific nation, Samoa. Those positions have now changed and Australia, New Zealand and Samoa have all declared their support for the UN Declaration. Among the 34 non-voting States were 10 Pacific nations: Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Only one Pacific nation, Federated States of Micronesia voted in favour of the UN Declaration.

Climate Change

Climate change is already disproportionately affecting the small islands of the Pacific. Although islanders have done little to contribute to the cause, less than 0.03% of current global greenhouse gas emissions, they are among the first to be affected. Most islands are experiencing climate change impacts on communities, infrastructure, water supply, coastal and forest ecosystems, fisheries, agriculture, and human health. The consequences of sea level rise, sea temperature increases, ocean acidification, altered rainfall patterns, and overall temperature rise will be increasingly felt.

In the small island States of the Pacific a majority of the population depends on the natural resources from farming, forestry and fisheries, which are susceptible to the effects of climate change. Indigenous peoples in countries like Kiribati, Niue, Marshall Island, Tokelau,

¹ The Pacific comprises the following: Australia, Cook Islands ((Rarotonga), Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nauru, New Zealand (including Tokelau), Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu), the three French territories (French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna) the United States territories (American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands), Timor-Leste, the Province of West Papua, Indonesia, the islands of Hawaii, USA, and the island of Rapa Nui, Chile.

Tuvalu, and Nauru, small atolls in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu and in the Torres Straits of Australia stand to lose everything because of rising sea levels. Indigenous peoples will not only lose their lands, natural resources and their livelihoods but also their countries. The loss of their lands and resources will affect their cultural and social identity.

On the evening of March 13, this year severe Tropical Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu causing widespread damage in the archipelago nation in the South Pacific Ocean. In the wake of the destruction caused by Cyclone Pam the President of Kiribati argued that climate change is increasing the impact of natural disasters.

Decolonization

Of the 16 Non-Self-Governing Territories currently listed for active consideration by the Special Committee on Decolonization, 4 (American Samoa, Guam, New Caledonia and Tokelau) are located in the Pacific. On 18 May 2013, the United Nations General Assembly voted to place French Polynesia back on the UN list of territories that should be decolonized and requested the French Government to "facilitate rapid progress [...] towards a self-determination process."² There are also independence movements in West Papua, a province in Indonesia and Hawaii, which was previously featured on the list but was removed after a referendum in 1959.

Environmental Hazards

After the Second World War the United States, along with its French and British allies, frequently tested nuclear weapons in the Pacific region. British and American nuclear tests occurred in Australia, Mururoa (or Moruroa) Atoll in French Polynesia and Bikini Atoll in the Marshall archipelago of the Pacific. While nuclear testing in the Pacific has ended, there are still other nuclear threats to the region. The region has requested reparation to compensate for health effects to former site workers, civilians and military personnel at the old nuclear sites and surrounding communities. The Pacific region is also seen as a dumping ground for toxic and hazardous waste as well as nuclear waste on indigenous lands.

Migration

The issue of migration is central to the Pacific region. Over millions of years, the Pacific islanders travelled great distances in canoes to settle islands. During the colonial period, indentured labour was brought in to work in the sugar and pineapple industries in Fiji and Hawaii which alienated indigenous peoples from their lands. Also, indentured labour from the Pacific were brought to Australia during the late 1800s, early 1900s to work in the sugar cane fields as well as labourers for building roads and railways. Many descendants (now called South Sea islanders) married Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Today, a high percentage of Pacific Islanders reside overseas in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America. In some smaller countries, the number of people living overseas is greater than the number of peoples who remain on their island home. This has caused significant social problems as well as benefits such as the transfer of remittances, increased skills and education, promotion of tourism and small business.

² <http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/site-news.shtml>

The urban drift is also common in the Pacific with people seeking employment, education and health services. As a result the population of towns and cities have increased, thus impacting heavily on services and housing. In New Zealand, the drift from rural to the urban areas is high with over 80 per cent of Maori living in urban centres.