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## **Global Economics**

<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-11-21/kiribati-climate-change-destroys-pacific-island-nation>

# **Drowning Kiribati**

By [Jeffrey Goldberg](#) November 21, 2013

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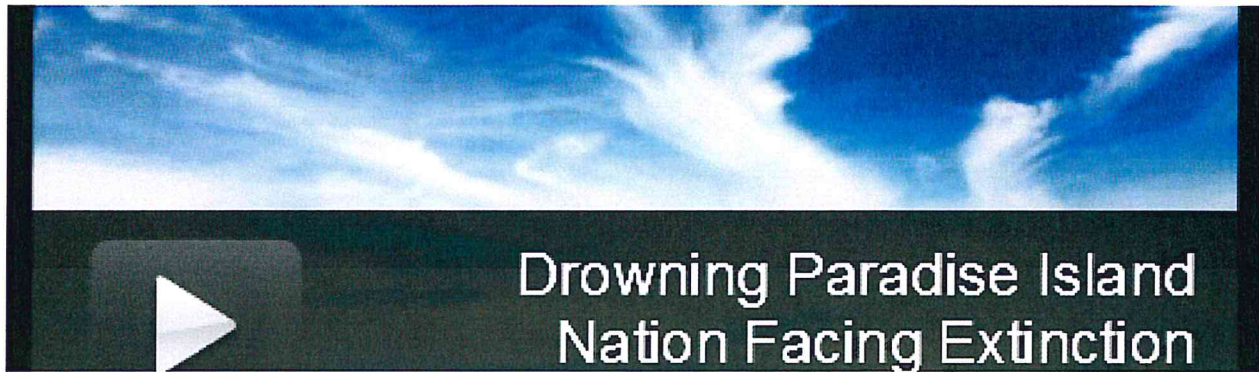
The spruce man with the trim mustache and the grim-faced bodyguard is dozing in his seat. A flight attendant leaves him a hot towel, and then another. The bodyguard, who wears the uniform of the Kiribati National Police—the shoulder patch depicts a yellow frigate bird flying clear of the rising sun—folds the towels carefully and places them on an armrest.

The Fiji Airways flight is moving north across the equator to Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati. The passengers include a Japanese executive who represents important tuna interests, a Mormon luminary from Samoa and his prim wife, and an American dressed in the manner of an Iraq War contractor, on a mission to recover the remains of U.S. Marines killed in World War II. We are all impatient for the sleeping man, who is the president of Kiribati, to wake up. We each have business to transact with him.

But the president sleeps. His name is Anote Tong. He is famous—or, at the very least, as famous as anyone from Kiribati has ever been—for arguing that the industrialized nations of the world are murdering his country.

Kiribati is a flyspeck of a United Nations member state, a collection of 33 islands necklaced across the central Pacific. Thirty-two of the islands are low-lying atolls; the 33rd, called Banaba, is a raised coral island that long ago was strip-mined for its seabird-guano-derived phosphates. If scientists are correct, the ocean will swallow most of Kiribati before the end of the century, and perhaps much sooner than that. Water expands as it warms, and the oceans have lately received colossal quantities of melted ice. A recent study found that the oceans are absorbing heat 15 times faster than they have at any point during the past 10,000 years. Before the rising Pacific drowns these atolls, though, it will infiltrate, and irreversibly poison, their already inadequate supply of fresh water. The apocalypse could come even sooner for Kiribati if violent storms, of the sort that recently destroyed parts of the Philippines, strike its islands.

For all of these reasons, the 103,000 citizens of Kiribati may soon become refugees, perhaps the first mass movement of people fleeing the consequences of global warming rather than war or famine.



This is why Tong visits Fiji so frequently. He is searching for a place to move his people. The government of Kiribati (pronounced KIR-e-bass, the local variant of Gilbert, which is what these islands were called under British rule) recently bought 6,000 acres of land in Fiji for a reported \$9.6 million, to the apparent consternation of Fiji's military rulers. Fiji has expressed no interest in absorbing the I-Kiribati, as the country's people are known. A former president of Zambia, in south-central Africa, once offered Kiribati's people land in his country, but then he died. No one else so far has volunteered to organize a rescue.

There is only one way out of Kiribati, and that's on the twice-weekly flights to Nadi, on Fiji's main island. Kiribati is so isolated that Tong can only visit his country's largest atoll, a former nuclear weapons test site called Kiritimati (Christmas), 2,000 miles from Tarawa, by traveling through other countries.

The sky is cloudless today, and the Pacific spreads out before us. The Japanese executive interrupts the white noise and says, "Big ocean." He says he hopes to talk to the president about some urgent matter of fishing rights. Kiribati is made up of 310 square miles of land and 1.3 million square miles of ocean. It is the Saudi Arabia of fish, except its leaders have allowed its only lucrative natural resource to be exploited by outsiders, including and especially the factory fleets of Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan.

We begin to descend, though there is nothing but blue below us. Tong stirs. I move to introduce myself, but the Mormon luminary, a man named O. Vincent Haleck, gets there first.

Haleck is a former chief executive of a tropical beverage distributor in Samoa and a member of the Mormon Church's Second Quorum of the Seventy, which makes him a very important Mormon in this stretch of the Pacific. He supervises the church's school system in Kiribati, which provides discounted tuition to parents who allow their children to be converted. The Mormons are in a battle for the souls of the I-Kiribati. Tong, who was educated by Catholic missionaries, smiles politely as Haleck describes the good deeds of his church. I catch only fragments of conversation: "water tanks," "computer lab," "Jesus Christ," and something about a visit to Salt Lake City.

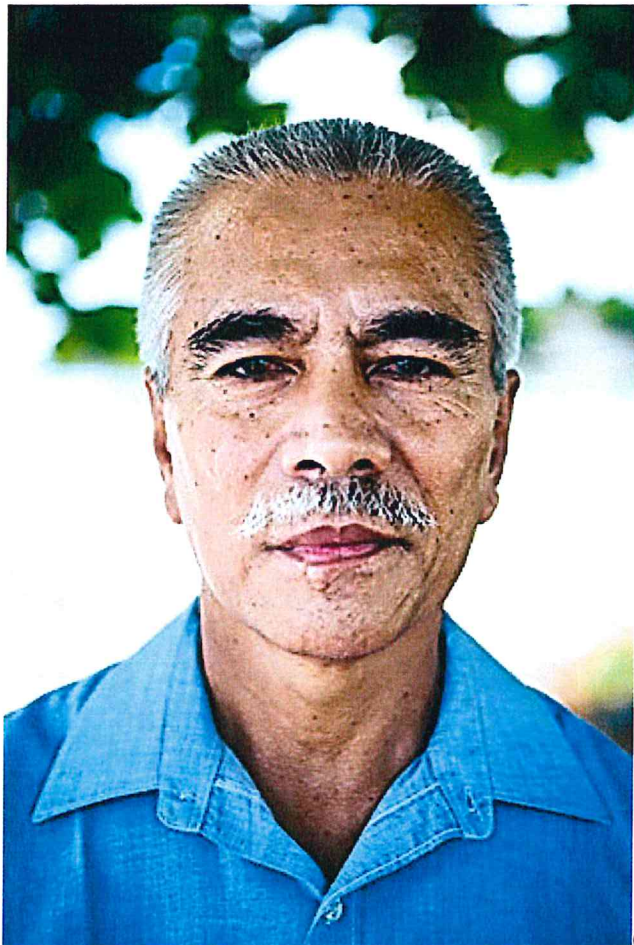
We continue our descent, and the neon-blue lagoons of the outer atolls come into view. The airplane is big, and the atolls are small. Haleck returns to his seat, and I introduce myself to the president. "Where are they going to land this thing?" I ask.

"The runway isn't underwater yet," Tong says, offering a wan smile. He takes a towel and rubs his face. "I'm so tired. I had a long night." The president, by reputation, has a fondness for kava, a ceremonial drink made from a root that possesses sedating and numbing properties. Tong's

government has promoted the use of kava as an alternative to alcohol, which is abused widely in Kiribati.

I explain that I'm visiting Tarawa to understand the impact of climate change on his country.

He smiles. "Hurricane Sandy," he says.



Claire Martin for Bloomberg

Businessweek Kiribati's president, Anote Tong, outside his oceanfront office

I attempt to protest, saying Kiribati's future should be of global concern, whether or not it teaches broad lessons about the climate crisis. Tong, educated at the London School of Economics and universally thought to be the savviest of the Pacific island presidents, isn't buying it. "You want to see what happens when the ocean comes in but doesn't go out," he says. "The ocean went back out in Hurricane Sandy, but one day it won't. It will stay."

Tarawa comes into view. Its enormous lagoon is aqua blue. The ocean, on the far side of the atoll, is darker, its color edging closer to purple. White sand covers the empty beaches, and waves break slowly on the shore. The crescent island is narrow, startlingly so, and covered in stands of coconut palms. South Tarawa—the heavily populated portion—is 950 meters across at its widest point, and yet 51,000 people live there. The population is packed tight, roughly 5,000 people per square kilometer, almost five times the density of Bangladesh.

"We are a very vulnerable country," Tong says.

As the wheels touch ground, children without shoes or shirts emerge from a grove of coconut palms and chase the plane. A row of tin- and thatch-roofed shanties lines the runway. No fence separates these shacks from the airport.

“People shouldn’t live on the runway,” Tong says passively, as if he weren’t in charge. A single red firetruck stands watch. It looks rusty. “Does it work?” I ask Tong. “Yes, I should think so,” he answers.

I ask to interview him while I am on the island. “Yes, just come by,” he says. “Don’t come today. I’m going to sleep.”

We leave the plane under a dazzling sun. Tarawa is only 97 miles north of the equator, but the heat doesn’t feel like the baking kind. Tong waves and walks across the runway with his bodyguard to a waiting car. The rest of us are herded into the arrivals building, a large shed. Suitcases are being dumped on the runway, kicking up dust as they land.

The border inspector asks me my business. I explain my assignment, rather too fully. She says, “Write down that we don’t want to leave.”

People press in on the exiting passengers. Children swarm; they are covered in dust. Many of the adults are barefoot and wear church-donated T-shirts from America. Stray dogs, suffering from mange, their ribs showing, run through the crowd. Almost everyone is obese or at least substantially overweight. Legless men are strangely common.



[Photograph by Claire Martin for Bloomberg Businessweek Photo Essay: Kiribati Sinks as Pacific Ocean Rises. Where Will Its People Go?](#)

A couple emerges from the crowd. The man is a New Zealander named John Anderson, about 60 or so, smiling, skin lobster-red, wearing a bush hat. His wife, Linda Uan, is from Kiribati. She is a community activist and amateur anthropologist who has taken on the task of looking after the rare visiting journalist. We get in their car and drive. The ocean is to our left, the lagoon to our right. I ask them the name of the road we're traveling. "There's only one road," Anderson says. "It's just, the road." Soon the atoll narrows to about 50 meters wide. Then we're crossing a pockmarked causeway, connecting one islet to another. Anderson says we have now reached the summit of what he calls Mount Kiribati, the highest point on the island—three meters above sea level. Up ahead, lean-tos stand like pickets on the beaches.

"All it takes is one wave," Anderson says. When Ban Ki Moon, the secretary-general of the United Nations, paid an overnight visit to Tarawa a couple of years ago, his security guards placed a life jacket in his hotel room, just in case.

"Good morning, Jesus," the preacher says, and his flock responds with alacrity, "Good morning, Jesus." The minister—the youth pastor in the village of Te Bikenikoora—holds his Bible aloft. "Let us sing a song to ask the Lord to protect us from climate change so that we can remain in our homes." Many of the worshipers look up to heaven for salvation.

As the youth minister preaches, the Reverend Eria Maerere sits on a bench along the side of the *maneaba*, the communal meetinghouse at the center of this village, and hums quietly. The open-air *maneaba*, which is built on a foundation of coral, has a high, peaked roof covered in screw-pine leaves. It is a church, a schoolhouse, a community center, the seat of local government, a bingo hall, and sometimes a place to sleep for the night.

"In the last king tide," Maerere tells me, "the water came up on the floor. We had fish inside." King tides, the highest tides, come two or three times a year. The entire village, 400 or so people, came out to push back the water. The *maneaba* was saved, but the people of this village are losing their homes to the ocean. So far, the people of Te Bikenikoora have had to move 40 houses out of the water's path.

The people of this village gather in the *maneaba* often to talk through the options. Leaving is a theoretical proposition for the moment, because there's nowhere to go. Some of the young are training to be seamen in hope of finding jobs on Asian fishing trawlers, or nurses to seek work in the old-age homes of New Zealand. "Migration with dignity" is what Tong calls it: making the people of Kiribati useful to the nations that might grant them safe harbor. But most I-Kiribati are so bonded to each other by blood and clan and so connected to their land that dispersion for many is an idea too painful to contemplate.



Photographs by Claire Martin for Bloomberg Businessweek. Clockwise from top left: Villagers on Abaiang atoll gather for movie night in the *maneaba*; a nun with students at Saint Joseph's College; at the Seamans Night Club in the Tarawa port district, a couple sways; a disabled man fills a water bottle in the old fishing market in Tarawa

The I-Kiribati live an exceptionally communal existence. "The strongest impulse of our people is to gather together," Linda Uan says. Kiribati society is more or less classless, though in some schools I visited, children with new flip-flops were thought of as privileged compared with those who went to school barefoot. More people participate in the coconut-based economy than the cash economy, particularly on the outer islands. Close clan relationships provide structure and contain disorder. It has long been taboo in Kiribati to refuse a request from a family or clan member. This custom has sapped some people of the desire to accumulate wealth, but in any case, ostentation is discouraged. Tarawa, in particular, is so thickly settled that only a culture of humility and cooperation can ward off turmoil and violence.

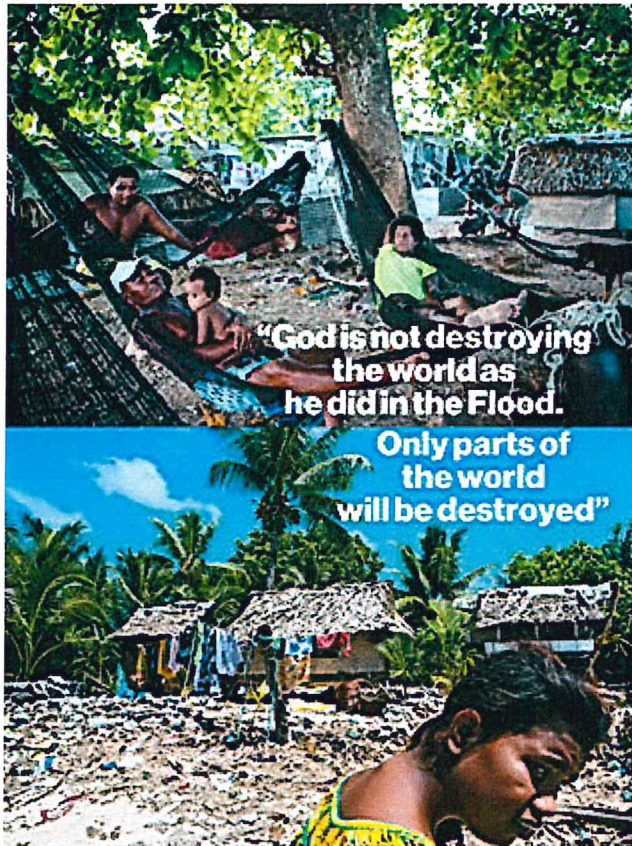
Some people in Maerere's church have never left Tarawa. Others have visited Kiribati's outer atolls. A smaller number have visited other countries. For many I-Kiribati, the entire world is 500 meters wide.

Maerere is the leader of this settlement, which was founded by a Pentecostal denomination based in Missouri, the Assemblies of God. He is a man of roughly 60, solidly built, deliberate in speech, with a corrugated face and a slight limp. He thumbs slowly through his Bible as a choir of teenage girls sings, in three-part harmony: "God, you are higher than any tides, stronger than any winds."

I ask Maerere if the near-constant invocation of water and wind at this Sunday morning service is for my benefit. "No, this is what we pray about," he says. The youth pastor preaches in the Kiribati

language, and Maerere hands me his Bible. It is open to the Book of Genesis. “This is the voice of God,” he says, and asks me to read it to myself:

“Look! I am about to cover the earth with a flood that will destroy every living thing that breathes. Everything on earth will die. But I will confirm my covenant with you. So enter the boat—you and your wife and your sons and their wives.”



Claire Martin for Bloomberg Businessweek  
From top: Men relax in hammocks during the afternoon heat; shanties in the Bairiki Village slum in Tarawa. Residents dispose of sewage and trash on the beach

Maerere says, “The other day my little granddaughter said that we should build an ark and leave it on our beach for when the flood comes.” Many in his flock have made similar suggestions. “We’re praying over this thing all the time. The people have a vision of building a big boat.”

The minister continues: “God has such great love for us. We praise you, God, for your protection. You, God, are our No. 1 helper. We will be strong when the wind hits us. We will be protected by you. We need to be strong in our faith.”

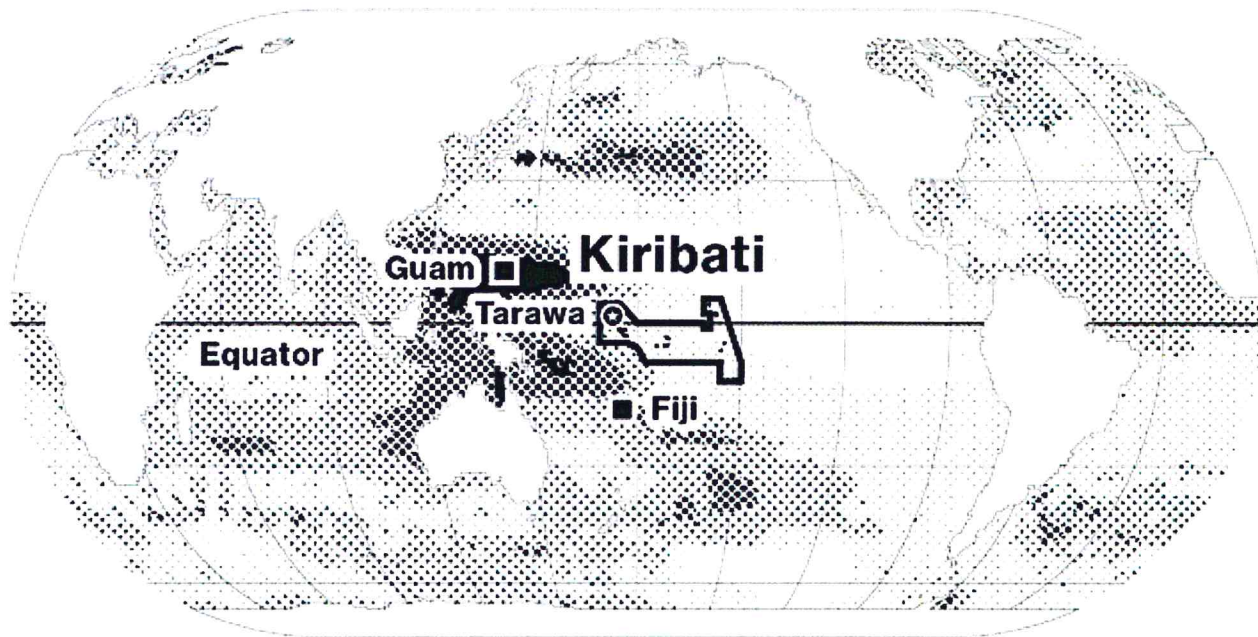
We leave the maneaba. My first impression was incorrect: By noon, the heat on Tarawa is utterly sapping. At midday, people sleep by the side of the road. Men are napping on thatch mats as we walk through the settlement. We pass a fetid saltwater pond. “This is new,” Maerere says. Saltwater is moving up through the ground and pooling in spots across his village. The banks of the pond are covered in garbage—jerrycans, rice sacks, motorbike engines, cardboard boxes. Small piles of excrement—dog, pig, and human—foul the air. We come to a shallow channel that has cut the settlement in half. “This is also new.” Maerere walks to a stand of dead coconut palms, bent in defeat. “The salt kills them.”

Why don't you build seawalls? I ask. The government, he says, provides a bit of money for seawalls made of coral and stone and concrete, but they collapse under the pressure of the tide. His village is a shambles. The best houses are made of concrete and tin; most are put together with leaves and sticks and chain-link fence. Coils of barbed wire are used to fence in pigs. Every house seems to own a pig or two. They're saved for feasts—first birthday parties, mainly. The I-Kiribati don't mark the arrival of children until their first birthday. The infant mortality rate here is the second-highest in the Pacific, and the people are wary of premature celebration.

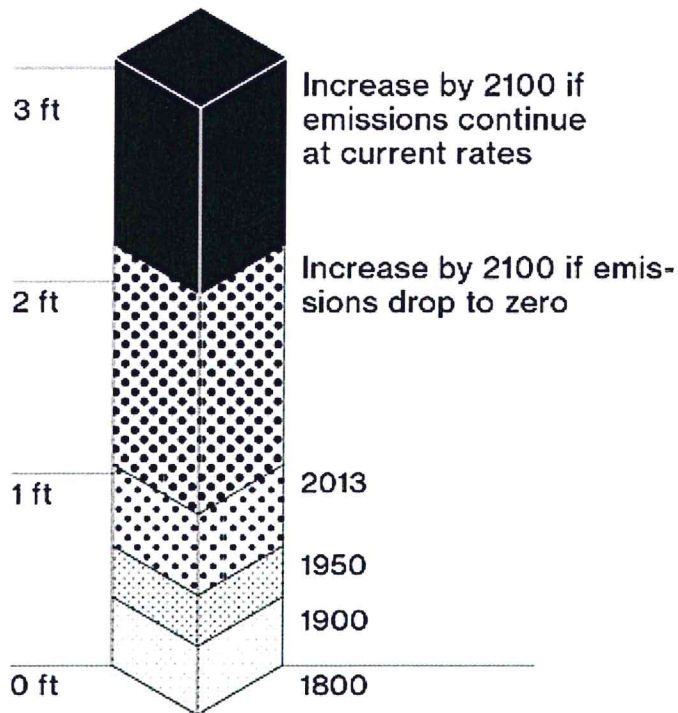
# A Rising Pacific

Average yearly sea-level rise, 1992–2013

□ no change/negative   0-3 mm   ▨ 3-6 mm   ▩ 6-9 mm   ■ 9+ mm



## Global average sea-level rise since 1800



GRAPHIC BY BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK. DATA: U.N. IPCC 2013 "CLIMATE CHANGE: THE PHYSICAL SCIENCE BASIS", NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

We walk across the trash-covered sand down to the water. Maerere points out locations of particularly severe erosion. This didn't happen all at once, he says, but the pace is quickening. He has no data, just

his own experience. But science supports his observations. The U.S. government says that over the past 20 years the oceans have risen at a rate of 3 millimeters annually, faster than at any time in the past several thousand years. Three millimeters per year is no tsunami, but it reduces the margin of safety for sea level communities across the globe.

As we walk, Maerere talks about a paralyzing theological conundrum presented by the ocean's rise. "The Bible says that when the flood came to an end and the waters receded, God promised Noah that he would not destroy the earth anymore," he says. "As a believer in the word of God, we know this to be true. God would not break his promise to us."

Maerere, like most of the country's other Christian leaders, was slow to accept the notion that the earth is warming. The churches—several Protestant denominations, the Catholics, and the Mormons—have resisted warnings about the coming crisis. But this is changing. The president has subjected church leaders to repeated lectures on the topic, and the evidence of dramatic change is all about them. A Catholic priest named Father Martin, who lives on the atoll of Abaiang, a two-hour boat ride from Tarawa, says he came to believe in the reality of climate change when the ocean flooded one of his villages, and then didn't leave, a replay of what happened in Maerere's settlement on Tarawa. "Islets that we used to visit in the lagoon have gone under," he says. "We are having to build seawalls all the time now just to protect the coconut trees. We used to drink the underground water, but now it's too salty, so we drink only the rainwater. They told us that this would happen, and it is."

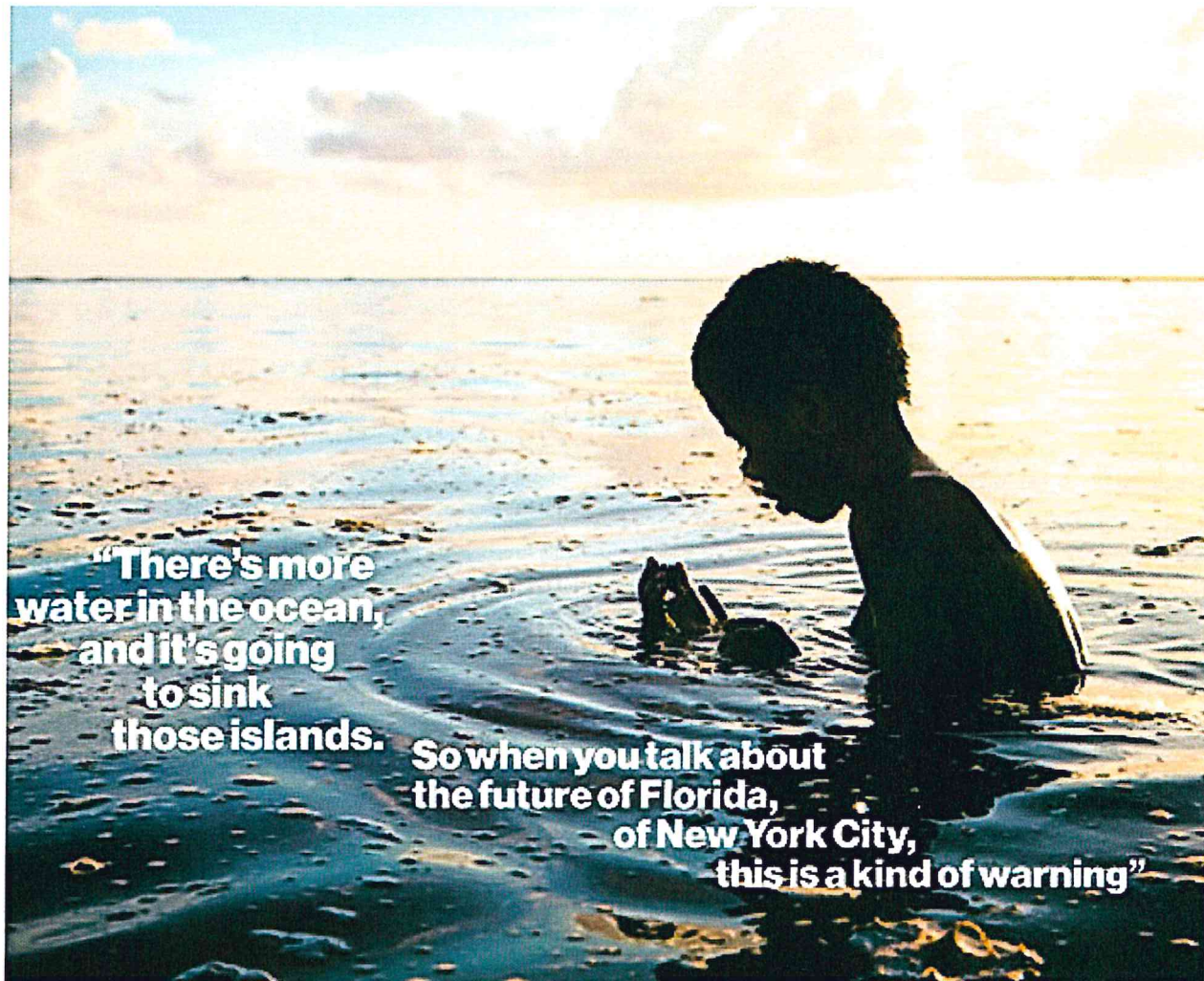
A second argument made by the government—discussed intermittently and with substantially more ambivalence—is that these atolls, under so much environmental stress already, are incapable of carrying more people than they do now. The island clergy tend to resist arguments in favor of family planning and birth control. "We believe in the rhythm method," Father Martin says. The island's Mormon leader, Iotua Tune, says his church opposes birth control because its doctrine teaches that "preborn souls" in heaven are waiting to receive their earthly bodies in Kiribati. "If we have no bodies here, where will these people go?" he asks. "We don't control births just because of overpopulation."

Maerere believes there is enough room on the planet for his people, just not in Kiribati. He told his granddaughter, who had asked him to build an ark, that God would not hurt them, which is why God is providing them with sufficient time to prepare. "I said to her that God is not destroying the world as he did in the Flood. Only parts of the world will be destroyed." Maerere says he is ready to send his grandchildren away to countries built on mountains. "The time will come when they have to go." He will not leave, however. "I'm too old. I will stay here." And what happens when you run out of water to drink? "Then I will have to ask God for more help."

For at least 3,000 years, the ancestors of the I-Kiribati lived in a state of equilibrium with their surroundings. They were, for the most part, blessed by isolation. The ocean gave them tuna and shellfish, the atolls gave them coconut palms and taro, the underground lens, a reservoir of fresh water, provided well water, and the world barely knew of their existence.

Historians believe that the I-Kiribati descended from migrants from what is today Indonesia. Invaders from Samoa and Tonga subsequently mixed with the local population. Westerners first sailed through these islands in the 1600s, but it wasn't until 1882 that the Gilbert Islands became a British protectorate. The British ruled the Gilberts (and neighboring island chains as well) uninterrupted, except for a three-year period during World War II. The Japanese occupation ended when U.S.

Marines, at a huge cost in lives, invaded in November 1943. The massive guns of the Japanese, placed to repel the American invasion, still stand on the shores of Betio, the most populated islet of Tarawa.



Photograph by Claire Martin for Bloomberg Businessweek

Decolonization came late to the Pacific, and the Gilberts did not gain independence until 1979. This just so happened to be the same year that British mining companies took the last of the guano deposits from Banaba. The British left Kiribati in a half-developed state. Tarawa, the seat of government, became a draw for outer islanders, young men who knew just enough of the larger world to find subsistence fishing and coconut harvesting insufficiently stimulating. The public sector quickly blossomed.

Foreign aid, necessary to support an elaborate federal bureaucracy, soon made up half of Kiribati's budget. Petty corruption became endemic. Government dysfunction, poverty, the adoption of Western diets by many people, and overcrowding have combined to create a crippling disease burden. Diabetes is ubiquitous. Tuberculosis, leprosy, and other communicable but curable diseases still afflict hundreds. Diarrhea and food poisoning affect most everyone, especially children. George Fraser, the Australian high commissioner to Kiribati, told me, "Put aside the issues of sea-level rise and saltwater inundation, we have all the conditions necessary for a cholera epidemic."

A few days after I arrived on Tarawa, I paid a visit to an Australian nun named Marella Rebgetz of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan. She's an engineer, assigned by her order to help Kiribati protect its

diminishing supply of clean water. She has a deep affection for the country and a frank appreciation of its many dysfunctions.

One of the many problems facing Kiribati is that so many people live directly on top of Tarawa's main water lens, the pool of filtered rainwater that floats atop a larger lens of saltwater. The lens, which is located about six feet underground, supplies the country with most of its fresh water. "One of the main problems for us is finding a place for people to defecate," she said. "They're basically defecating into the lens. It's very crowded here."

I told her of something disconcerting I had just seen. While taking a walk at low tide on the beach, I saw two men in the water, probing the sand for shellfish: a bucolic scene; a travel poster, even. Fifty meters away, a woman hitched up her skirt and defecated in the shallows. I told Rebgetz that I felt I should have warned the men against eating the shellfish. I was also tempted to tell the woman to stop shitting in the ocean.



Claire Martin for Bloomberg Businessweek A girl and her pig in the fetid waters of Bairiki, a densely populated slum in Tarawa, the nation's capital

Public health experts on Tarawa estimate that 60 percent of the island's people are outdoor defecators. The head of the Public Utilities Board, Kevin Rouata, who has the impossible job of protecting the water lens, explained that outdoor defecation wasn't entirely due to a lack of other options. "When I was young, you would see old people talking with each other in the water while they were defecating," he told me. "People still think it's much more pleasing to do on the beach, because there's a breeze and a nice view and water for washing. We have to make people know that the inside bathroom is also pleasing."

Rebgetz went on to describe another challenge to the purity of Kiribati's water supply. It is common for families to bury their dead in their small, swept-dirt yards. After the bodies decompose, the bones are sometimes exhumed, washed, oiled, and then brought out at family gatherings. The dead are never truly dead in a spirit-filled culture such as Kiribati's. It's not this ancient practice that gives pause, she said; it is where the bodies are buried—next to wells, and often at the exact level of the water lens.

By then, I was compiling a list of the woes that afflict this country. It was an expansive and protean list. One whole subcategory consisted of matters concerning defecation.

“Welcome to the rip in the time-space continuum known as Kiribati,” Rebgetz said, smiling. “You're through the wormhole now.”

Fraser, the Australian high commissioner who came to Kiribati after serving on Nauru, a nearby island nation made desolate, like Banaba, by guano mining, said the main hope for the I-Kiribati on Tarawa is to move to the more lightly populated atolls, or to begin preparing for an orderly escape altogether. He described a potentially insurmountable challenge for Kiribati: On the one hand, it is President Tong's duty to attract investment and aid. On the other hand, he must also plan for his country's eventual evacuation. It's difficult to attract investment to a place that might soon drown. This paradox leaves Kiribati poor and utterly reliant on external aid, mainly from Australia and New Zealand. (The U.S. has no resident ambassador on Tarawa; the U.S. ambassador to Fiji also serves as ambassador to Kiribati, as well as to Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu, a portfolio that suggests a certain lack of American focus on the Pacific islands.)

The various ministries that comprise Kiribati's government seem outmatched by the challenges they face. The Ministry of Fisheries is perhaps the most important of the government's departments; it brings in more than \$30 million in licensing fees each year. The country's entire budget is roughly \$130 million annually, so without fishing fees the economy would collapse entirely. It's widely believed on Tarawa—certainly among the small contingent of aid workers, diplomats, and economic advisers who live here—that Kiribati is exploited by the fishing industries of South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and the U.S.

If Kiribati were to put fishing licenses up for auction, it could double its income from fishing. But the government appears frightened of alienating the companies that fish Kiribati's territorial waters and continues to accept low-bid offers, in particular from companies that look after the needs of ministry employees. I asked an Australian official who works with the government to keep afloat its one patrol boat (a boat that is meant to keep a watch on fishing grounds the size of India) whether he believed that Kiribati was exploited by the commercial fishing industry. Not exploited, he said. Raped.

One expert, Greg Stone, an official of Conservation International, the environmental group, was more diplomatic but suggested a similar pattern. “Imagine if the Saudis got 5 to 10 cents for every dollar of crude oil they exported. This is about what Kiribati is getting for tuna,” he said. “There's a fear that if they negotiate any harder, the countries will go away. But I think the market point is higher, and as long as they have fish, they'll have demand.”

The fishing ministry is housed in a derelict two-story building in the center of Betio, the islet that is Tarawa's commercial center. The barely lit offices are up a dark, semi-passable staircase. Mountains of rotting boxes containing ship records and license applications clog the stairwell. I asked the director of fisheries, Raikaon Tumo, about the licensing process. He said, “It's quite simple. If they wish to fish, they show an interest to you. They buy permits for each fishing day they want to fish.” Is the government charging too little for these permits? “The companies are very generous with us,” he

said. I mentioned the two late-model Japanese SUVs with ministry markings on their doors parked outside. “The companies give us very generous donations,” he said.

Fear of losing income from the factory-fishing fleet also helps to explain why Kiribati officials do so little to stop the trafficking of child prostitutes, who are regular visitors to the foreign trawlers and fish-processing ships docked in the port of Betio.

The prostitutes, who are as young as 14 and said to be marketed to these ships by relatives, had come to be known as “Korean girls,” but when representatives of South Korean fishing companies raised objections to this embarrassing designation, the Ministry of Fisheries asked the public to refer to these prostitutes as “easy girls” instead.

When I asked Tumoia about the traffic in prostitutes to the fishing fleet, he said, “I don’t see it as a problem, what is done on the boats. It’s like having a nightclub on the mother ships.”

One quarter of women under the age of 25 on Tarawa have engaged in “transactional sex,” said Andre Reiffer, the World Health Organization’s liaison to Kiribati. “The word ‘prostitution’ has negative connotations to people here, so it’s called transactional,” he said. We were speaking at his office on the grounds of Tungaru Hospital. “In some cases, these girls are bored teenagers who go out to the ships because the sailors are nicer than the men at home.” There is, he said, a serious problem of domestic violence on Tarawa, fueled by alcohol. “Some of these sailors treat these girls like wives when they’re in port.” Often, these young women are not paid in cash, Reiffer said, but are given watches, or jewelry, or a tuna.



Photograph by Claire Martin for Bloomberg Businessweek A man hangs out his laundry in Tarawa’s Bairiki Village, one of the most high-density slum areas in Kiribati

“It’s possible to feed many people with these gifts of tuna, so it’s considered a valuable gift,” he said. Then he made a small joke. “The good part is that the families of these girls will be eating healthy food. Fish caught out at sea is clean. It’s not infected by shit.”

So many of Kiribati’s challenges are evident at the hospital in Tarawa, which is a comparatively large, and very dirty, ocean-side complex. Most of the buildings are long, single-story wards connected by outdoor walkways. Families with money can buy semiprivate rooms, but most patients are provided metal frame beds in large, open spaces, including the leprosy ward, where I counted 15 patients. Leprosy has made something of a comeback in Kiribati, particular in Betio. High population density helps spread the disease, which is transmitted through close and sustained contact between people. In 1999 the country reported having only 13 cases. Kiribati health authorities now report 200.

One woman, who gave her name as Emeri, said she’s been fighting leprosy for several years. She had few of the obvious markings. She told me she hoped to move back to her home island, the lightly populated Butaritari, to Tarawa’s north. “The doctor said it’s good for me there, the air and the water.” Her family on Tarawa cares for her now. Her grown son was seated shirtless on the floor, drowsy and silent, absentmindedly eating a package of dry ramen.

Kiribati also has a substantial population of the tuberculosis-afflicted. The chief of the TB eradication program, a physician named Takeieta Kienene, said most of those infected with tuberculosis are living at home and are visited by nurses who deliver their drugs. Overcrowding, he said, is a root cause of tuberculosis infection, but so far, the island’s rudimentary medical system can handle the caseload.

For those suffering from other diseases, though, hospitalization overseas is the best option. “We have the surgical facilities for simple surgeries, but complicated issues must be sent abroad,” said Kienene. I’m told that the Cuban doctors who help staff the hospital specialize in amputation. Every month, by some estimates, 20 or 30 people lose feet and legs to diabetes.

The government of Kiribati has a modest budget to send the more grievously ill to a hospital in India. A panel of physicians meets periodically, Kienene said, to decide which patients should be sent away. Those in need of heart surgery or orthopedic surgery often qualify. Most cancer patients, he said, do not. “We don’t send people out for leukemia. It’s not a good investment, because the cancer will come back. Then we would have to send them out again.”

What about a child with leukemia? I asked.

“No,” he said. “Not a good investment.”

So, they die?

“They die,” he said.

This is very cruel, I said.

“We don’t have a lot of cancer because people don’t live long enough to contract it,” he said. Life expectancy for males in Kiribati is 63; for females it’s 67. “Many men die in their 50s so they don’t have time to develop lung cancer from smoking.”

Kienene said he has grown accustomed to making these sorts of choices. “We have the funds to refer 10 or 12 patients a year. We are careful who we choose. It is only people who we think can live.”

Later, I walked behind the hospital to the beach, the location of a small incinerator. It had been broken for some time, and medical waste was accumulating. Stray dogs rooted through mounds of trash. I saw one dog walking along the beach, carrying a wad of bloody bandages in its mouth.

To suggest that, before the arrival of the West, Kiribati was a vision out of Gauguin would be to over-romanticize the past. Injury and disease and deprivation, of course, existed. On the other hand, no one who spends time on these islands would argue that modernity has been any kind of blessing. The West's manifold gifts to Kiribati include diabetes, tobacco, chlamydia, and Spam.

The importation of Christianity has adulterated an ancient culture. Underfunded schools have produced graduates with more ambition than opportunity, though some are at least trained for low-paying work in New Zealand and Australia. Post-colonial sovereignty has not made Kiribati independent in any but the most technical sense of the word. Like the other small island countries of the Pacific, Kiribati has always been a stepchild of the international system, an unappreciated, mainly ignored ward of wealthy nations. And then, in recent years, it has become the object of a pitiless experiment. We now have an idea of what will happen to people in low-lying places when the industrial powers of the world burn fossil fuels with reckless abandon. Climate change is the ultimate gift of the West, of those who produce greenhouse gasses, to the people of Kiribati, who don't.

Early one morning near the end of my stay, I made my visit to the president's office. Tong had not yet arrived. There was no security presence, just an open gate and a dirt driveway. The presidential office is a two-story building, about the size of an American split-level. A broken copy machine stood in an alcove, just inside the front door. Piles of boxes crowded the first floor waiting room. I sat on one of two couches, which were covered in plastic. I was wearing a suit and tie and sweating quite obviously. When Tong arrived, alone, wearing a traditional skirt and a pair of flip-flops, he asked, "Why are you dressed like that?"

"Native costume," I replied.

Sun shone through the windows of his second-floor office, which overlooked the ocean. We could hear the waves crashing on the beach. The water was of sufficient distance that the building wasn't under threat, but the tides have forced him to build low seawalls around his home nearby.

Tong seemed tired again. "I haven't enjoyed being president," he said. He has held the job since 2003. "Getting things done is really a chore. I haven't been sleeping very well. Yesterday I had a very busy morning, with a lot of pressure, so I said, 'Maybe I should take my blood pressure.' It was dangerously high. I had some exercise, and I went to bed early, so it's down now. I feel like I won't get a heart attack, because I'm not prone to heart attack, but I might get a stroke."

I asked if his diet was heavy in sodium. "I prefer the island food, the less processed diet. But I also love the salted fish. That's what is going to give me a stroke."

He also suggested he had a taste for Spam and the Spam-like meats that are eaten everywhere on the island now. People whose diet once consisted mainly of coconut and shellfish now survive on canned pork, white rice, and sugared soft drinks. The island's principal supermarket—a dark, clammy warehouse near the port in Betio—stocks, by my count, nine types of Chinese-manufactured canned pork.

"We love it," Tong said. "It's become part of our tradition. But I try to stay away."

“Feasting,” he explained, is part of island tradition. “It’s overeating, it’s from the traditions of the old days, when you ate when there was a lot of food, but people were not sedentary then. They were working hard.”

White rice and salted meat, and even saltier ramen, and the sugary drinks, these are hurting your country, I suggested. “There are many things that are hurting my country,” he replied. He began to make a list for me, taking special note of overpopulation, so I asked why he was allowing people to live directly atop the contaminated water lens.

“I would love to have dictatorship powers for six months,” he said. “But on the issue of settlement on the lens, we are kicking those people out. They’ve been given eviction notices.” He said the process of removing people from atop the lens has been going on for 20 years.

He continued, “We don’t have everything working here like it should. The people want to crowd onto Tarawa. I know that. But our problems are rooted in climate change.”

You seem angry, I said.

“Yes, I have anger and frustration. I should say I had anger and frustration. But I’ve matured in a sense, because I’ve reconciled myself to some realities. I came to the conclusion that nobody listens to an angry person. You’ve got to be very rational. You’ve got to contain your anger and turn into practical solutions. I understand the realities of this world. People care about what affects them. They don’t care about things they don’t feel. But my anger is not going to make the United States and China stop burning coal.”

What will?

“They have to come here and see it for themselves. They have to see the water come in,” he continued. “The strategy I’ve adopted has been this: You recall the international preoccupation with terrorism? You recall that there was solid support for the fight against terrorism? You should focus on other security issues. Ecoterrorism is equal to terrorism. This is a kind of terrorism that is more dangerous in one way, because it is treated as legitimate and acceptable. Maybe 10 years ago, they didn’t know what they were doing. But it’s not an excuse any longer.”

I thought you said you weren’t angry, I responded. Now you’re accusing the U.S. and China of terrorism.

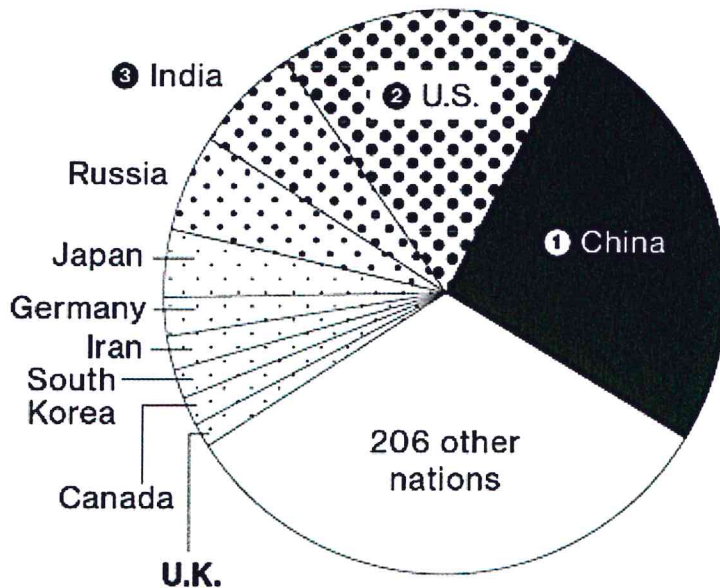
“They have to pay attention,” he said. “We’re a frontline country. We’re the canary in the coal mine, it’s true. I have to get them to pay attention.”

The Obama administration understands the crisis in Kiribati serves at least a pedagogical role. “There are many canaries in the coal mine on this issue, but this is an important one for a very obvious reason,” Todd Stern, the U.S. Department of State’s special envoy for climate change, said. “When you look at the parade of terribles, the massive events we’ve been seeing—the typhoon in the Philippines, gigantic floods in Pakistan, two 100-year droughts in the Amazon within five years, Hurricane Sandy—we can’t tell you that each one happened because of global warming. You can question the link between specific events and general warming trends. But the warming of the oceans, the melting of glaciers—this isn’t debatable. There’s more water in the ocean, and it’s going to sink those islands. So when you talk about the future of Florida, of New York City, this is a kind of warning.”

## As the World Burns

About half the world's population emits 68 percent of the carbon, inflicting climate hardships on smaller nations. Leaders of industrialized countries have resisted calls to compensate societies at risk.

### Share of carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels



❶ Rapid development and coal consumption made China the world's top carbon emitter in 2007.

❷ Last year, warmer winters and a shift to natural gas pushed U.S. emissions to their lowest level since 1994.

❸ India made it clear prior to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change meeting that it would not cut emissions ahead of rich nations.

GRAPHIC BY BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK. DATA: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

Stern said American sympathy for countries such as Kiribati doesn't mean that compensation—either from Washington or any other industrialized nation—is coming, despite demands from countries on the frontline of climate change. In a recent speech in London, Stern said, “Lectures about compensation, reparations, and the like will produce nothing but antipathy among developed-country policymakers and their public.” Still, in speaking with me, he said the U.S., as a leading provider of humanitarian aid, is working with Pacific governments to “deal with the effects of climate change.”

In our interview, Tong said he believes the Obama administration cares about the issue. But he noted that “there are people in Congress who are allergic to the term ‘climate change.’” These are the people, he said, he wants to visit Kiribati before it's too late.

They will have to come soon, because he gives his country less than 20 years to live. “If nothing is done, Kiribati will go down into the ocean. By about 2030 we start disappearing. Our existence will come to an end in stages. First, the freshwater lens will be destroyed. The breadfruit trees, the taro, the saltwater is going to kill them. So we won't be able to maintain the integrity of all the islands. There's no high ground. So we will have to evacuate islands. We will defend the islands that we can, but we can't protect against storms. We have very moderate weather here, but if that changes with the climate, we won't survive. We would not survive a Hurricane Sandy. We would be finished. It would push the ocean across our islands.”

The people of Kiribati, he said, understand what is coming; already, one family has sought asylum in New Zealand as climate change refugees. “We are working on many different plans. There’s a Japanese company that makes floating islands. We’re looking into that. But people understand they may have to leave forever, and this is hard. We have the wish to survive as a people. I lived in New Zealand once. I thought I was in paradise. I had all of this access to all the different ice creams. But our people like it here. We will lose our homeland unless the ocean stops rising. It’s very simple. We want to stay home. This is where the spirits live. This is where we’re from.”

He paused. “This is not caused by us. This is caused by you.”

Goldberg is a columnist for Bloomberg View.

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