



**SMALL STATES  
CONFERENCE ON  
SEA LEVEL RISE**  
MALE, 14 - 18 NOVEMBER 1989

**FIJI**  
**COUNTRY STATEMENT**

Delivered by

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16-18 November 1989

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REPUBLIC OF FIJI

COUNTRY PAPER

The Republic of Fiji, a country of a little more than 700,000 people and more than 300 islands, straddles the International dateline between the 15th and 21st parallels south of the Equator, and is often aptly referred to as the "Crossroads of the Pacific."

Scattered over 650,000 square kilometres of some of the world's richest ocean, Fiji has a total land area of 18,333 square kilometres. Some of the islands are surrounded wholly or in part by coral reefs which create large lagoons and often form excellent natural harbours. The larger islands are mainly volcanic in origin with high rugged peaks and surrounded by low-lying or flat coastal strips. The smaller islands are mainly of coral or limestone.

The climate is tropical maritime without extremes of heat or cold with variable rainfall which is usually more abundant in the warmer months from November to April.

The economy is characterised by its small size in terms of land area, population and a limited fragmented domestic market. It is a very open economy and is therefore heavily dependent on the import/export trade. As such, we are highly vulnerable to economic conditions in the outside world.

Sugar and tourism are the mainstays of the economy each earning in the region of \$US200 million annually, followed closely by gold, fisheries and timber, with garment manufacturing rapidly increasing its share of GDP through the recent establishment of Tax Free Zones.

Just as Fiji is highly vulnerable to economic conditions in the outside world, which conditions are generally predictable and have a sufficiently long lead-time for local adjustments to be made, it is more vulnerable to disturbances in the atmosphere and to the oceans surrounding it that result from natural forces.

Fiji is located in what is referred to as the "Hurricane Belt" of the South Pacific and includes some of the other South Pacific countries invited to this Conference, most notably the Republic of Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.

There have been a total of approximately 150 cyclones of varying severity recorded in Fiji waters since 1875. The frequency of these has not been regular - five years may pass without a blow and then the country would be ravaged by four cyclones in the year after.

While wind damage to property and crops through particularly strong cyclones have proven to be severe, the greatest damage to life and to crops has been caused by the storm surge accompanying the cyclone. It has been determined that the storm surge from a mature tropical cyclone of hurricane intensity is typically about 4 metres. Extremely intense systems have caused surges of up to 6 metres.

When we have had strong hurricanes, the salt water intrusion into sugar cane lands has taken large acreages out of production for anything up to 3 years when sufficient rain has fallen to leach out the salt. If the mean sea level was 1.5 metres higher than it is today, the effect on the population and on the economy would be more devastating than it has been.

As I had indicated earlier, most of the economically productive agricultural lands in Fiji are in the low-lying coastal strips and delta areas of the larger islands. The total land area of Fiji is 1,837,800 hectares of which only 298,300 ha is potentially good agricultural land.

But a rise in the mean sea level by 1.5 metres today would lead to the infiltration of sea water into approximately 50,000 ha of agricultural land currently in production i.e. 17% of total land with good agricultural potential, and further reduce productivity in the areas bordering that thus intruded by an increase in the salinity of the aquifer. Total sugar production will drop, and a significant proportion of the rural farming population will be displaced and forced into a position where new alternative homes and activities in the higher parts of the country has to be sought for them.

A 1.5 metre rise in the mean sea level today would virtually destroy Fiji's tourism industry. Most of Fiji's resort hotels are located on the sugar belt on Fiji's largest island, Viti Levu, and

on the small islands offshore. These have been invariably built right on the beaches and only the most recently built "Sheraton of Fiji" has made provisions for 6 metre storm surges. But for most of the other resorts located on the shoreline of the larger islands and those on the small coral islands off-shore, a 1.5 metre rise in the mean sea level will destroy them and virtually wipe out a \$US200 million industry.

Concern for yet another phenomenon that promises to further complicate the behaviour of our natural environment is gaining momentum throughout the world and is indeed the reason for this Conference.

Scientists who are involved in the study of the "Greenhouse" effect on the sea level appear to fall into two categories. On the one hand, there are those who, while admitting that there has been a small but steady rise in the level of the sea over the last 500 years, believe that a full 20 year programme of intensive observations and research still needs to be undertaken before it can be categorically concluded that if the present rate of emission of carbon dioxide and chlorofluorocarbons (CFC's) into the stratosphere is allowed to continue unchecked, the mean sea level will have risen 1.5 metres by the middle of the next century.

The other group of scientists firmly believe that the level of the sea will rise 1.5 metres by the middle of the next century at the present rate of emission of "Greenhouse" gases and insist upon the putting into place of the necessary corrective measures now.

The acceptance by my Government of the invitation issued by the Government of the Republic of Maldives to send a delegation to this Conference is a confirmation of our stance in the issue of global warming.

This Conference is timely. It is following closely on the heels of a similar Conference held on the subject in the Netherlands earlier this month that was attended by 72 nations including the U.S.A., the Soviet Union, Japan and Britain. But the fact that these nations have strongly resisted a call by the Dutch for a stabilization and eventual reduction in the emission of carbon dioxide indicates quite clearly that we have to be vigorously active in the highest fora of the world family of nations in the pursuit of the various outcomes of this Conference. We have more to lose than they have. Indeed, our very existence is at stake.

Many of the small island states including Fiji already have in place measures to reduce hardships to the population caused by temporary disturbances of the elements such as cyclones, hurricanes, storm surges, floods etc. My own Ministry is charged with the responsibility for the provision of the basic essentials of life during these events and for the housing rehabilitation of the victims afterwards. To this extent, we are organised. But we are not as yet programmed to combat the slow "creeping death" of inevitable sea level rise. The Dutch have managed to survive and thrive on dry land below mean sea level for many years through some marvelous feat of engineering. Is there a lesson to be learnt from them?

My Government would very strongly support any initiatives arising out of this Conference that would lead to strengthened co-operation amongst the small island states from the Caribbean, Pacific, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions in the search for solutions to the devastating effects on the environment of global warming. In fact, we would very strongly support the convening of a Small States Summit to set the trend for this co-operation on the basis of the outcome of this Conference.



The attitude of the large industrial nations at last week's Conference in Europe is a clear indication of their unwillingness at this stage to bear their share of the responsibilities for global atmospheric pollution. This should, however, not deter us, the small island states from continuing to seek their assistance in the setting up of scientific monitoring stations within our various regions; for vigorously advancing technology in the more efficient use of renewable and other energy resources as opposed to fossil-fuels; for diverting more of their resources towards re-forestation programmes in the larger developing countries; for setting up the necessary co-ordinative machinery to link up our various island regions; and to generally seriously consider the future existence of our island nations in the light of their continued industrial developments.

I reiterate the good wishes of my Government for a positive and fruitful Conference.

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