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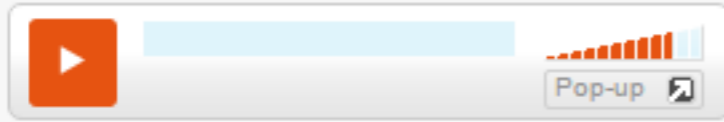
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Obama talks climate change survival with small island states' leaders

02 Dec 2015 | By Sarah Abo

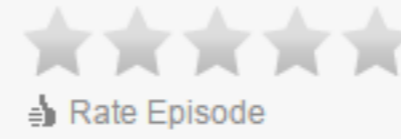
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US President Barack Obama has met the leaders of several small island nations to discuss the impacts of climate change on their communities.

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US President Barack Obama, third from left, with heads of state from small island nations, in Paris (AAP)

He says after growing up on an island he sympathises with their plight-- and believes it's the world's responsibility to prevent the disastrous consequences of climate change. As negotiations begin between nations trying to slow climate change and its effects, one of the world's most powerful leaders has met his counterparts from much smaller nations. US President Barack Obama says he wants to work with the island nations to mitigate the effects of rising sea levels. He told the leaders from the Asia-Pacific the Caribbean - including Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Papua New Guinea, and Barbados and Saint Lucia - they're not alone.

"I am an island boy. I grew up on an island. I understand both the beauty but also the fragility of island ecosystems. If sea levels rise at currently projected levels or the pace that is currently projected some of their people will be forced to flee their homes, some of their nations could disappear entirely and as weather patterns change we might deal with tens of millions of climate refugees from the Asia Pacific region."

The Pacific Islands Development Forum is a new international group developed through private sector and civil society, which Kiribati President Anote Tong says has a vision for a united, distinctive and sustainable society.

"For some countries, it's about their industries not being affected, but for us it's about the survival of our people. I don't know, maybe my logic is bad but I always fail to make these people understand what is the difference between having a drop in your GDP and having no home. Which one is more critical, I don't know. I'm not communicating well because people are not hearing."

With his nation just two metres above sea level, Mr Tong has been fighting for recognition of the issue for years. He's called for a moratorium on the creation of new coal mines - something Australia has ignored. Fiji's National Disaster Management Minister Inia Seruiratu says the future is a real challenge for the region.

"We in the Pacific are among the most vulnerable in the world, and we are the most and worst affected as well. When it comes to changing weather patterns, and of course when it comes to disasters as well."

While conceding Fiji is better off than some neighbouring nations, he says it has a small economy and the agriculture sector is already feeling the effects of climate change.

"It's these very oceans, that are our way of life but also a threat to us, because of climate change. From rising sea levels, encroaching salt water intrusion which also devastates our agriculture. As we speak, we are going through one of the worst droughts experienced in the region. In Papua New Guinea, massive, massive, massive losses to agriculture, and it's affecting us as well, particularly with our water resources and of course our food security as well. Crops and livestock are badly affected."

Some people have already been forced to pack up and leave their homes. Mr Seruiratu says 40 entire communities have had to relocate.

"And we have identified another 800 or so that needs to be relocated in the near future. So it's not something we expect down the track, it's already happening. Coming here to Paris, is about fighting for our human rights. For us, for the small island nations of the Pacific, it's about our right to life. It's about survival, it's about our right to life. And I hope that we will not be denied that right."

Most of the recent danger has come from natural disasters, which Mr Seruiratu and others believe are intensifying due to climate change. In March, category 5 Cyclone Pam claimed more than a dozen lives in Vanuatu.

"Recently we've also had two category 4 cyclones - 2010, Cyclone Thomas, huge damage and losses. And for small economies, recovery and rehabilitation is a big issue. 2012, another category 4 cyclone, Cyclone Evans."

Mr Seruiratu is calling for industrialised nations to reduce carbon emissions and hopes Paris will achieve a legally binding agreement. So too, does the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Enele Sopoago.

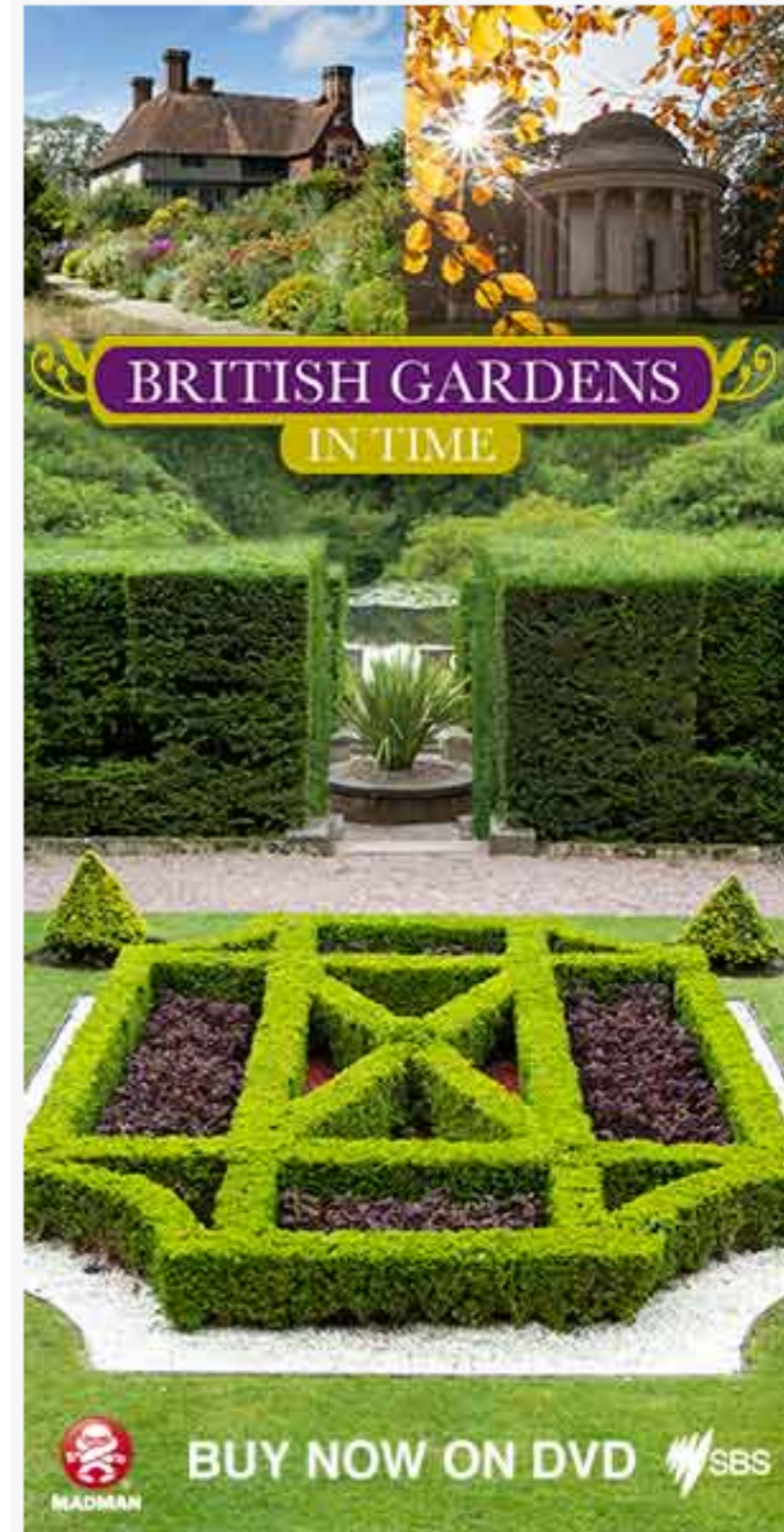
"To work with these big whales, we small fish must stick together, work together. [Limiting warming to] Two degrees increase in temperature is to save economies. That is the very very least ambition. We cannot go with that. What we are seeking is 1.5 degrees Celsius below, much below that. Why? Because that is to save our people. To save our islands."

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Though world leaders meeting in Paris hope to achieve a binding agreement to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius, Mr Sopoago is concerned the planet is on track to reach three degrees unless drastic action is taken.

"It will sink Tuvalu. It will sink many of our countries. It is a moral duty for us. Can we allow that to happen here, out of the agreement of COP21? The answer must be no."

Though there has been much talk about funding to compensate for loss and damage, that's not what Mr Sopoago wants.

"Relocation cannot be an excuse for no action for saving people in their God-given islands. For Tuvalu, we will never be forced to move out. We are determined to remain, and build, adaptation, even elevate the islands. Even with other sophisticated innovations, to make sure we maintain and save our people."

According to the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security, more than 70 per cent of households in Kiribati and Tuvalu - and 35 per cent of households in Nauru - have reported they would migrate if the impacts of climate change, such as drought and flooding, render their home uninhabitable.

However, very few can afford to.

More than 6,800 people were involved in the survey, from Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru.

Sea level rise and salt water intrusion were among the major factors found to influence decisions on whether to migrate either internally or overseas.

Sarah Abo is in Paris courtesy of the UN's weather agency, the World Meteorological Organisation.

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