

Wanted: trust fund benefactors

Written by Rodger A Payne

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Mohamed Nasheed, a former journalist and political prisoner who was elected president of the Republic of Maldives last fall, is relatively pragmatic (and pessimistic) about the future prospects of his nation constituted by 1200 small islands in the Indian Ocean. In an op-ed for the *New York Times*, Nasheed explained his plans to create a national trust fund:

In the next couple of years I hope to start investing the proceeds of tourism in a sovereign wealth fund. This trust fund will act as a national insurance policy to help pay for a new homeland, should future presidents have to evacuate a country disappearing under the waves.

For the sake of the Maldives and the rest of the world, I hope this fund never needs to be used for its ultimate purpose. I hope instead, that it will pay for future mitigation measures such as reinforcing seawalls and boosting coral reef protection, in a world that has stabilized temperatures to tolerable levels.

Nearly half a million tourists visit the Maldives each year, so I suppose this plan might generate some serious revenue. However, as explained in *Science News* earlier this year, for physical reasons, the Maldives are expected to be among the first casualties of rising sea levels wrought by global warming.

“They are like the canary in the coal mine in terms of the dramatic impact of climate change on a whole civilization of people,” says Harvard University biological oceanographer James J. McCarthy, past president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. “They didn’t cause the problem, but they will be among the first to feel it.”

The president of Kiribati, Anote Tong, is asking his affluent neighbors Australia and New Zealand to help train about 1000 of his island’s natives annually so they will have useful skills when forced to evacuate their nation, located in the Pacific about halfway between Hawaii and Fiji. Kiribati has a population of about 100,000 and the inhabitants are already noticing environmental changes that seemingly threaten their future.

Ultimately, climate change is expected to create tens of millions of environmental refugees — mostly from the poorest nations of the world. Since the wealthy nations have added the overwhelming majority of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere and can perhaps afford to pay for national adaptation, it is fundamentally unjust that the greatest burdens of climate change are going to be particularly acute for the world’s most vulnerable peoples.

Affluent nations should certainly take this problem into account during the next few months as they build toward Copenhagen, but self-interest is a powerful countervailing force. Earlier this week, for example, the Associated Press ran a story with this headline: “Southern governors say don’t forsake oil, coal in clean energy debate.” These governors were from Alabama and West Virginia, not the “Global South.” Since those governors have plenty of sympathetic allies in the U.S. Congress, Mohamed Nasheed might want to move quickly on the trust fund plan.

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