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Tornado damaged house in Auckland. Credit: RNZ

South Pacific: Climate Change Havoc Worries New Zealanders

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By Kalinga Seneviratne

SUVA, Fiji, 12 April 2023 (IDN) — It is not only the poor island countries of the South Pacific that worry about the future in the midst of climate change. New Zealand—a comparatively rich country—is worried too after devastating floods and cyclonic storms brought destruction to the islands this year.

“More frequent and intense rainfall should be expected across the country due to climate change; more communities will be caught in harm’s way and more lives will be lost.” This was the advice given by conservationist Tom Kay to 13 members of a local council and its mayor in late March, while warning that their development model needs to change.

The former British colony, an affluent country of 5.1 million people with 72% of its population of European descent, has been a magnet for migrants in recent years in search of a quiet comfortable lifestyle. But, that perception of New Zealand may change soon if the recent natural disasters continue.

New Zealand has had a rough start to 2023. In late January and into February thousands of people in Auckland were affected by one of the worst flooding in living memory, and when they were recovering from it the nation was shaken by an earthquake measuring between 5.7 to 6.3 magnitude struck off the coast. Cyclone Gabrielle, the worst storm to hit New Zealand this century, followed this immediately.

If all this was not enough, on Easter Sunday a tornado struck the outskirts of Auckland, blowing off roofs and windows. Radio New Zealand reported that one woman who has recently migrated to New Zealand was heard

screaming from inside her home horrified by what she was experiencing.

Auckland is the largest city in New Zealand and home to 1.6 million people located in the North Island of the country. One of the worst affected suburbs by the flooding disaster was Mangere, a community of predominantly Pacific islander migrants who have come from Tonga, Tuvalu, Niue and Cook islands. All of them have experienced increasing havoc from cyclones and rising sea levels in recent years. Now their new homes have been flooded.

New Zealand's Prime Minister Chris Hipkins declared in March that climate change was real and warned that the country's extreme weather will continue at greater frequency. He seems helpless in how to stop such devastation. "The country needs to be prepared to deal with more of these events in the near future," he warned.

But, Climate Change Minister and co-leader of the Green Party, James Shaw pointed out that New Zealanders have been arguing for too long about whether climate change existed and that has cost them valuable time in preparing for these disasters.

"I don't think I've ever felt as sad or as angry about the lost decades that we spent bickering and arguing about whether climate change was real or not, whether it was caused by humans or not, whether it was bad or not, whether we should do something about it or not, because it is clearly here now, and if we do not act, it will get worse," he warned.

On April 10, the tornado that hit parts of Auckland has toppled trees and damaged about 50 houses. But when it reached Kapiti coast about 20 km from New Zealand's capital Wellington, it recorded wind speeds of 96 km/h—some even say it may have been higher. This year, in March and February what is believed to be tornados have hit other parts of the country as well.

In Kapiti Coast about 20 houses had its roof ripped off. A resident in one of the houses has told Radio New Zealand (RNZ) that, she was woken up by her daughter's screaming and the winds lasted about a minute but was very scaring. Another said that everything happened so quickly, and he saw a tree falling onto the road, and pink sheeting from his roof in his backyard.

Meanwhile the Bay of Plenty Times reported on April 11 that Kiwi Fruit farms have been affected in the area. Kiwi Fruit has become a major New Zealand's agricultural export in recent years especially after its juice became popular in Asia.

The newspaper reported that a local family took shelter in a hallway as a tornado ripped past their home and significantly damaged a kiwifruit orchard. Farmer Shelley Edmiston has taken cover in her home with three daughters and saw debris flying as the tornado tore through the kiwifruit orchard, taking out tall trees and orchard poles as it neared their yard.

According to a report released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Cyclone Gabrielle has caused significant damage to homes, infrastructure, and livelihoods across northern and eastern regions of the North Island.

The cyclone is New Zealand's costliest non-earthquake natural disaster, with economic losses expected to exceed NZ\$ 2 billion (USD 1.2 billion). Primary sector exports will be largely affected, because orchards were hit hard by Gabrielle that struck the Hawke's Bay during a key harvest period. Hawke's Bay apple growers account for around 70% of New Zealand's NZ\$900million (USD 557 million) annual apple export trade.

Auckland's water utility Watercare has estimated that widespread damage to its network from floods and Cyclone Gabriel would cost between NZ\$250-450 million to repair. The Auckland council has told Watercare that with a

deficit of NZ\$295 million already, they have no money to help built the damaged water network.

Bad land-use policies have contributed to New Zealand’s predicament today, argues conservationist Kay. “Cyclones of some form could pass close to New Zealand with increasing frequency,” warns Kay. About 90 % of the country’s wetlands have been drained – often for development – and the results have been devastating, he points out.

“Wetlands are like sponges in the landscape. They basically absorb water when we have heavy rain and then they slowly let that water out when we have drought conditions,” explains Kay. “We’ve tended to drain them in the past because we have this colonial perspective that wetlands are wastelands. We treat them as swamps.”

Kay said that when Pākehā (Whiteman) came to the country, many of them turned wetlands into pasture for livestock farming. With so much of the country’s wetlands now converted into farmland and urban areas, Kay argues New Zealand has lost its intergenerational knowledge of places that “used to flood a lot”.

When it comes to finding solutions, he has a hard word for councils—stop treating the environment as a “nice-to-have”. He argues that stronger rules protecting wetlands needed to be introduced and enforced. Also, restoration remains critical.

“The environment is critical,” argues Kay, “we need to put that first, otherwise we’ve got nothing.” [IDN-InDepthNews]

NEWSLETTER

Photo: Tornado damaged house in Auckland. Credit: RNZ

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