



World Chronicle

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Small Islands and Environmental Disasters

In recent years, small island nations have increasingly been struck by natural disasters. Some leaders worry that global climate change may become responsible for even greater disasters in the years to come.

Can the United Nations help small islands to survive and prosper? How do the vulnerabilities of small islands affect their development? What were the outcomes of the 2005 Mauritius Conference on Small Islands?

These are some of the issues discussed in this episode of World Chronicle with the help of Anwarul K. Chowdhury, UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States.

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ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

JENKINS: Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins.

Floods, hurricanes, typhoons...and tsunamis. Never in recent memory have so many island nations – from Haiti to the Solomon Islands, and from Fiji to Sri Lanka – suffered so much from natural disasters. Can the United Nations help small islands to survive -- and prosper -- in the twenty-first century?

We'll be talking about that with today's guest -- whose portfolio includes being High Representative for the Small Island Developing States: UN Under-Secretary-General Anwarul K. Chowdhury.

Joining us in the studio are Thalif Deen, the UN Bureau Chief of Inter Press Service, IPS ...and Tuyet Nguyen of Deutsche Presse-Agentur, DPA.

JENKINS: Ambassador Chowdhury, it's often said that in politics you need a major crisis to get anybody to sit up and pay attention. Has the tsunami had that effect? Is the world now focused on the environmental problems that affect small island developing states?

CHOWDHURY: Well, first of all Tony, thank you very much for asking me to join you on this episode of the World Chronicle. Yes, tsunami highlighted the global attention with the meeting in Mauritius, which was being planned as a ten year review of the Barbados programme for the Small Island States. I believe that the world felt that these small islands needed special attention, they needed their support; but let me mention very clearly and this mood was pervasive in the conference that tsunami, or natural disaster, is one of the vulnerabilities of the small islands. They have environmental vulnerability, economic vulnerability, they have the disaster vulnerability and that is what was highlighted by the tsunami. But the delegations felt that as this is a ten year review, they should keep focus on the longer term needs of the small island states. So they focused on the issues or priorities of the Barbados programme...and...

JENKINS: I'm sorry to butt in ambassador, but you haven't really answered my question. Did this tsunami get people to sit up and pay attention? Are you expecting something more than an outpouring of generosity from around the world? Is

everybody going to forget about this in six months? Or are we going to see some real differences in the way that the world reacts?

CHOWDHURY: You are absolutely right...tsunami got the attention and the small islands benefited from that attention. But whether they forget it in six months or not, will depend on how the UN system focuses on implementing the outcome of the Mauritius meeting.

DEEN: At the conference, there was a proposal to set up an early warning system. How long is it going to take? And what about funding for this system? Are there any donors that have volunteered to fund this early warning system?

CHOWDHURY: At the Mauritius meeting, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, proposed that there should be a global early warning system covering all natural disasters and he felt that in various parts of the world, various disaster related early warning systems were in existence. It was felt that a global system covering all disasters would be more cost effective and would be more beneficial to disaster prone countries. Funding, yes. I think there has been quite a bit of interest among many donor countries and also in the private sector to support such an early warning system. What we need to do is to get all the interested countries and parties together. Just recently, there was a meeting in Bangkok to discuss the next steps regarding the early warning system. Following the Mauritius meeting, there was the World Conference on Disaster Reduction. Also, this early warning system came up with a high profile, and I believe this is now the responsibility of the United Nations...

JENKINS: Tuyet...

CHOWDHURY: ...To follow-up. And funding, of course, there will be enough funding.

NGUYEN: But, but....the early warning system...was that the main goal of the Conference in Mauritius? I thought you went there to call the world's attention to the economy, and to the under development of small islands and try to repair the damage caused by...nature...the elements. The tsunami has probably increased or aggravated the problems but this was not the goal of the conference.

CHOWDHURY: Yes, absolutely correct. And that is what I was telling Mr. Jenkins when I responded to his question. Tsunami highlighted, highlighted the profile also not only among the member states but in the international media. For the conference, we

basically had the media coming out of the regional centers like Nairobi and Johannesburg coming to Mauritius, but the post tsunami people started coming from Europe, Reuters and the BBC; with top agencies started sending their headquarters based people. So it got the attention - but you are absolutely right - the focus of the conference was on the broader concerns of the small island states. Their economic development prospects, their environment vulnerability and of course, the disaster came. So, if you read the Mauritius strategy, which is the main document for follow-up, we will find that fourteen priorities out of Barbados had been incorporated.

NGUYEN: When you were there, did you have the feeling that if the island were struck by the tsunami, what would be the destruction of the island? It is purely imagination, but if you see the destruction in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, you can imagine the destruction on Mauritius's island because all the cities are near the shores. What would happen?

CHOWDHURY: Yes, and Mauritius is a small island. It's sixty-five kilometers by forty-five kilometres, so each part of Mauritius is close to the sea. And a disaster like the December tsunami would have struck havoc in that country.

JENKINS: I'm interested by the balance of problems that you have to deal with. Because on the one hand, when we talk about small island developing states, I think we are talking about what? About forty countries...

CHOWDHURY: Thirty-seven who are members of the United Nations and twelve territories.

JENKINS: Some of them quite a bit wealthier than others. In the case of some of them, they are concerned that if the current global weather scientists are right, then ultimately their fate is to drown. They will disappear altogether under the waves. And yet, in the meantime, you're talking about economic issues, about how to improve the standard of living for people, how to prevent or protect them from rising sea levels. But ultimately, they can't do anything from stopping the sea level from rising. So how do you balance the need on one hand to deal with these immediate concerns about raising their standards of living against the other problem, which is, that their entire existence, their entire nation may disappear?

CHOWDHURY: Absolutely, I think you have expressed this in a very graphic way, because this is the challenge that the small islands are facing. I mean small islands

generally are known to the public for their idyllic nature, their beautiful beaches and wonderful sunshine; but people do not understand that these countries are threatened in their existence, and this is the problem. But the reason we talk about development concerns and environmental vulnerability is to show that we are concerned about today's poverty, which affects small islands – most of the small islands - and tomorrow's environmental disaster which is threatening them.

JENKINS: And so at Mauritius you got commitments on which of those areas?

CHOWDHURY: Both, both.

JENKINS: Serious commitments? Serious money?

CHOWDHURY: I hesitate when you ask whether we got money. I would say the more important thing is to how the international community can work with the small islands to develop their programmes. I believe if things work, if programmes develop well and are executed - money would come.

DEEN: To follow-up on that question, when you refer to small island developing states you get a mixed group of countries. You got Singapore, which is among developing countries and is one of the richest countries; you got Cuba and you got Guyana. I noticed that there are some cynics who say that some of these countries are neither small nor island nor developing states. Who is responsible for the definition of small and developing states?

CHOWDHURY: As a matter of fact, there is no formal definition that will add and divide a small island developing state. It has evolved, The list has evolved over years and before the Barbados meeting, actually before the Earth Summit in Rio, in 1992, a small group of island countries came together to form what they call the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) as an acronym, and that group has stayed on. You mentioned a few countries including Guyana, Belize or Guinea Bissau, Suriname; these are coastal states but having the same development concerns of the small island states.

JENKINS: Well Talif, at least they have some seaports, some coasts. Your area of responsibility actually also includes landlocked countries and least developed countries, some of which don't have a sea within thousands of miles of them. How did that come about?

CHOWDHURY: That is very true. I mean these three groups: the least developed countries, the landlocked, and the small island countries, are the three most vulnerable groups.

JENKINS: Vulnerable to what?

CHOWDHURY: Vulnerable to...Least developed countries are vulnerable to economic structural adjustment – economic situations; and landlocked and small islands are geographically vulnerable. And I believe that the UN system and the international community should give very particular attention to these countries. If we cannot listen to their needs and concerns, I believe that the UN system will lose all its credibility of being able to help the poorest and the most vulnerable countries.

JENKINS: So there is a common set of solutions across the board for the three of them?

CHOWDHURY: Yes, the three of them have their own programmes of action. Poverty of course is the most endemic in all these countries and I believe that is very important, except for a few small island states. But poverty, and connected with it, is the issue of their ability to govern their own development programmes. I think governance is a major concern as we have seen over the last two, three decades...

JENKINS: And you are also talking about mitigating the effects of globalization then, are you?

CHOWDHURY: Yes, when I mentioned about governance, I am saying that the global organizations should also have a governance system that will help these countries. This will be not only a national governance, but also international governance, which will be helping them. And I think what is happening is that globalization is moving with un-stoppable speed and it is very difficult for these small countries or the poorest of these countries, to catch up; and it's very necessary that in that process, there should be adjustments made available for these countries so that they can come up to a level playing field.

NGUYEN: There has been lots of talk about an early warning system. Can you tell us or explain to us how it works? And in terms of communication on a small island, how do you tell the islanders to evacuate in the case of a tsunami?

CHOWDHURY: Well basically, any early warning system works on the basis of setting up two things: one is to advise the people, to inform the people for the need for

movement or evacuation and they should take shelter. The other is to provide them with enough places or shelters where they can be safe during the disasters. So these two aspects are necessary. And the small islands can develop such a system with international support. Communication is a major challenge, but I believe that I can speak for countries like Bangladesh, which is my country, where during floods, cyclones and tidal waves, a good system of communication has been developed through radio...even fishing boats have been provided with transistor radios, so that they can listen to them. And the meteorological department covers this very effectively.

JENKINS: Tuyet took us back to natural disasters, after the break, I would like to go back to man-made disasters. Let me just say...this is World Chronicle, and we're talking about the big environmental threat affecting small islands. Here's a video on what the Islanders of Tokelau, a territory of New Zealand, in the South Pacific, have done to protect their atolls from the damage brought on by cyclones.

VIDEO STARTS

NARRATION: In the early 1990's, islands across Polynesia were struck by two consecutive cyclones which swept the region with unprecedented force. Many houses were destroyed. Today, Tokelauans are still traumatized by the experience. Falima Teao, the former elected elder of Fakaofu recalls.

TEAO: "That cyclone in '91, I remember the people were in chaos, certain chaos. We couldn't assemble together. When the mayor tried to call the people, they were tending to their own houses and their own families. Very few of us were there in the church trying to prevent."

NARRATION: Soon after the cyclones, a seawall was built. The aim was to protect the island's most strategic and vulnerable parts to minimize the damage from future storms. Serge Ducasse is from the UN Development Programme, UNDP...

DUCASSE: "Our first response was an emergency response to natural disaster. We put some money there and then we started cooperating with the seawall. We contracted, in fact, a New Zealand construction company. UNDP paid for two barges and paid for some of the labour."

NARRATION: The Islanders put together wire mesh baskets and filled them with stones. These baskets are expected to last thirty years. But after ten years, some are already beginning to erode. Tokelau is gradually sinking at the rate of about one centimeter a

year. The islanders know they can't fight nature. Their hope is to get enough international assistance to repair and perhaps extend the seawall to completely surround the three atolls.

VIDEO ENDS

JENKINS: That's what I mean when I talk about man-made disasters, because the rising sea levels have nothing to do with the cyclones and earthquakes and that sort of thing. It has to do with the fact that we're burning fossil fuels, filling our atmosphere with carbon dioxide – it's heating up the planet - the ice cap is melting and sea levels are rising. At your conference in Mauritius, you heard from Dr. Rajendra Pachauri, who's the Chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. And what he had to say was really quite scary. He said that the human race has about ten years in which to take drastic measures to prevent – to deal with - this problem with carbon dioxide and fossil fuels to prevent planetary disasters. And he said if not, and I quote, we are risking the ability of the human race to survive, end quote. So when I see these images of people building a seawall out of wire baskets, I have to say that I am rather skeptical. Aren't the small islands in reality something much more important than what people think? I mean it's very easy to dismiss small island developing states. They're the canaries in the coal mine – really; they are the warning to the rest of the planet that we are doing something very dangerous to ourselves. Are you saying that? And if so, is anybody listening to you?

CHOWDHURY: Well, we are saying that, and I think more and more people are listening. Climate change is now getting the global attention in a much bigger way than it was. In February of 2005, mid February, the Kyoto Protocol will come into effect. We hope that that will give not only a responsibility to the member states of the United Nations but also to the private sector. To the public of the world in general, to adopt measures, to do things that will reduce CO² emissions, and to hope this will have a positive effect on the sea level rise. It takes a long time. We are facing the consequences of the things that have been done over the past twenty, thirty years and, if we start....

JENKINS: If I could just interrupt to explain that. What you mean is, that the sea level rise that they're dealing with in Tokelau at the moment is the product of the pollution that we put in the atmosphere about twenty or thirty years ago?

CHOWDHURY: Yes, absolutely.

JENKINS: So all of the pollution that has gone into the atmosphere from the past thirty or forty years – the consequences of that is still ahead of us – is that what you are saying?

CHOWDHURY: And we need to take serious measures, and I think the Kyoto Protocol is one such measure that will help stem the emission, which affects the sea level rise.

DEEN: Tony made the distinction between natural disasters and man-made disasters. Now, just after the tsunami disaster, there were billions of dollars that were raised for relief by relief agencies like UNICEF, Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children. At one point they said we don't need any money because we had enough money; but at the same time they have been unable to raise funds for Africa – problems in Sierra Leone, in Liberia, in DRC and Sudan. And there are some who said – because these are man-made disasters it's easier to raise money for natural disasters than for man-made disasters. Do you think that argument is correct? Valid?

CHOWDHURY: ...And also, I believe that man-made disasters develop over a long period of time. And natural disasters give you a visual response – immediately. You see it in the tsunami, and in this case, it was such a disastrous catastrophe because people saw it with their own eyes on television. So that is why it is very difficult. And it is one of the biggest challenges of the international community.

DEEN: So it is an instant reaction?

CHOWDHURY: Instant reaction...and a reaction of sympathy and support, it is there. And it is very important to remember that maybe the people who died in the few hours of the tsunami is equal to the same number of people who are dying in many parts of the world - out of hunger, out of disease, out of poverty.

NGUYEN: How was the participation or contribution from the United States in your conference? You know the Bush administration does not believe in the Kyoto Protocol at all.

CHOWDHURY: Yes, well...the United States was represented at the very high level. The Deputy Secretary of State was there and there were senior representatives from various governmental offices in that delegation. If you asked me of their overall support

to the conference concerning small islands, it was very good, very supportive. On the climate change issue, of course, they had big problems.

JENKINS: The Bush administration officials are not even allowed to use the expression climate change – if I'm not mistaken. They have to use the expression climate variability because they like to leave open the implication that what's happening to our climate could be part of the normal variability of climate pattern, am I right?

CHOWDHURY: In Mauritius, the coalition that was put together had serious difficulties and finally...of course, it was worked out in a manner that saves their position and also advances the cause of the small island states. The main problem I believe - which is needed - is not to fight in a conference which is focusing on the small island states, but to focus on the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol. I think that is the important lesson that we learned out of Mauritius.

NGUYEN: In early warning systems, which countries are going to pay for the systems?

CHOWDHURY: I think there is a willingness on the part of major countries including the United States, including countries in Europe, European Union countries, China and Japan.

JENKINS: I'm sorry, Tuyet, you keep going back to the early warning thing. I think that is a bit like fiddling while Rome burns. Your problem is to tell the rest of the world that with this tsunami, we want to build an early warning system to help people avoid this kind of catastrophe in the future. Not that it may happen but it will happen, and it will happen to all of the major developed nations in the world in the future... because the sea levels are rising and we're messing with the climate. Dr. Pachauri said that the developed nations – G7 nations, G7 plus Russia – G8 - this summer will have to commit to produce twenty five percent of their electricity from renewable resources within twenty years time, if we want to try and head off the worse consequences of global warming. Did you see anything in Mauritius, and that goes...you mentioned Kyoto several times...it goes way beyond Kyoto. Did you see anything at your conference that leads you to believe that they get it now...that those big states, the major developed states – including the United States – are prepared to commit to that sort of a goal?

CHOWDHURY: You see, and you know that while we make every effort at various forums, at various levels... we keep on emphasizing these concerns again and again and it is not one conference like Mauritius that brings very good results, very good participation... but still we have a long way to cover, and it is a step forward. I believe that the world is now concerned and it is now up to us – the United Nations – to see how best the Mauritius agenda can be implemented. We can have a good document but it will only be on paper. We have to implement, that is why Mauritius is very special because during the last two days of the conference – it was designated a high level segment – where the Secretary-General and many leaders of the world spoke – and those two days were devoted to the way forward. How we can implement change. And I believe that this is unique. Before they even adopted the document in the final hour, they had been talking about this implementation and we would like to see that the forthcoming UN conferences have that kind of format where they speak about implementation.

DEEN: You spoke of global governance. Now when you talk of assistance to a small island developing state, some of the donor nations insist on things like democracy, rule of law. Is the assistance tied to global governance?

CHOWDHURY: Well when I said global governance, I meant the global institutions which should provide equal voice to the small island countries, to the vulnerable countries, to the least developed landlocked countries. What I believe is that small islands or developing countries are understanding and realizing that democracy and participatory democracy provides the best opportunity to utilize your resources that you get from abroad.

DEEN: It's not a condition?

CHOWDHURY: It's not a condition. Many of the developing countries are themselves insisting that we should have an opportunity to develop a participatory democracy. Democracy which provides the voice of the people, an opportunity to say what they need in their communities, and I think community based development is becoming a major focus on future development concerns.

JENKINS: Ambassador Chowdhury, we have thirty seconds left – you have a message coming out of your conference – you say that you were impressed that

people started to talk about what to do next. Where are you going with this message now? Who are you talking to? What tables are you banging on?

CHOWDHURY: Well first of all, I'm asking the international media like yours to continue to focus on the concerns of these countries. Secondly, I believe that there are eight opportunities coming up during this year to highlight the concerns of these small island states in the inter-governmental forums. And the most important of which is the Millennium Summit Review Meeting which is coming up in September of 2005.

JENKINS: And we will have to leave it there because that's all the time we have. Our guest has been Anwarul Chowdhury, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States. He was interviewed by Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service, IPS and Tuyet Nguyen, German Presse News Agency, DPA. I'm Tony Jenkins. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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