

# GLOBAL WARMING: Around the Globe, Big Worries and Small Signs of Progress; Island Nations Fear Sea Could Swamp Them

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## ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Unprecedented flooding in Pacific has focused attention on warnings that global warming could cause seas to rise high enough in next century or so, devastating and obliterating many island nations (M)

## FULL TEXT

ONE sunny day in January, as Teunaia Abeta stood by and watched, horror-struck, a high tide came rolling in from the turquoise lagoon and did not stop.

There was no typhoon, no rain, no wind, just an eerie rising tide that lapped higher and higher, swallowing up Mr. Abeta's thatched-roof home and scores of others in this Pacific island nation.

"This had never happened before," said Mr. Abeta, 73, who wore only his colorful lava-lava, a skirtlike garment, as he sat on the raised platform of his home fingering a hand-rolled cigarette. "It was never like this when I was a boy."

That tidal surge was followed by another one in February. The flooding has helped focus minds here on warnings that global warming could cause the seas to rise enough in the next century or so to obliterate island nations like this one scattered in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

"The only resource we have is water," said Phillip Muller, foreign minister of the Marshall Islands, another country that could easily be drowned by rising seas. "Our livelihood is the sea. Now, all of a sudden, it's not a friend. It's threatening our existence."

Greenhouse warming is linked to a rising of the seas in two ways: by causing the water to expand as it warms and by melting glaciers and icecaps. "It's so close to the heart here," said Giff Johnson, editor of the Marshall Islands' newspaper, "because you're talking about people's very existence being wiped out by the ocean rising."

Industrialized countries like the United States are responsible for most of the greenhouse gas emissions, but they are reluctant to curb industry much while the scientific jury is still out on the seriousness of the effects. That annoys the island nations, which argue that by the time the jury reaches its verdict, they may be visible only at low tide. "It's like little ants making a home on a leaf floating on a pond," grumbled Teburoro Tito, President of Kiribati. "And the elephants go to drink and roughhouse in the water. The problem isn't the ants' behavior. It's a problem of how to convince the elephants to be more gentle."

Many of the island countries in the Pacific, including Kiribati (pronounced KIH-rih-bus), are collections of coral formations. Usually a string of islets around a turquoise lagoon, they resemble not so much nations as sandbars. Each island peeps just a few feet above sea level and is only about a hundred yards wide, sometimes less. A country like Kiribati, situated about halfway between California and Australia, can be three times as big at low tide as at high.

The countries most likely to go under the sea include Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu, all in the Pacific, and the Maldives, in the Indian Ocean. Many other island countries, including Tonga, Palau, Nauru, Niue and the Federated States of Micronesia, may lose much of their territory but for now are probably not in danger of total submersion.

The populations are small: Kiribati has 75,000 people, and only 10,000 live on Tuvalu. Those numbers pale beside the 150 million additional refugees forecast worldwide as a result of climate change by 2050, according to a 1993 academic study published in the journal *Bioscience*. Other studies suggest that a rise of three feet in ocean levels would force the evacuation of perhaps 70 million Chinese and 32 million Bangladeshis.

Yet at least countries like Bangladesh would survive, though perhaps in truncated form. The Pacific islanders fret not only about whether their countries will exist outside of history books, but also about changes they see in their climate today.

"These aren't storms, they're surges," said Mr. Johnson of the Marshall Islands. "It's nice weather, and all of a sudden water is pouring into your living room. It's very clear that something is happening in the Pacific, and these islands are feeling it."

Perhaps the most comprehensive study was issued last year by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an international group of experts. It suggested that seas may rise 18 inches by 2100. But it emphasized the enormous uncertainties and suggested that the real figure could be much lower or higher.

Even a rise of two or three feet would devastate Pacific island countries like Kiribati. Technical solutions, like sea walls, are available to protect low-lying lands, but those solutions are unaffordable for most low-lying island countries. In Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands, where the islets are in some places only as wide as the two-lane road that traverses each of them, a single wave often sprays the country from coast to coast. One study found that protecting the capital alone would cost up to three times the total national economic output. NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

## DETAILS

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