

Big polluters urged to pay as key Pacific summit opens in Tonga

August 26 2024, by Steven TRASK



Tonga's Crown Prince Tupouto'a 'Ulukalala (centre L), UN chief Antonio Guterres (centre R) and other leaders attend the Pacific Islands Forum on Monday.

Emissions-belching nations were challenged to stump up for climate-related damage as a key Pacific islands summit opened on Monday, with

low-lying Tuvalu declaring: "If you pollute, you should pay."

The Pacific Islands Forum got underway in Tonga's capital Nuku'alofa, with leaders hoping to draw global attention to the region's worsening climate plight.

"We really need to ensure that we continue to push for action from countries that are the most polluting," Tuvalu Climate Minister Maina Talia told AFP on the sidelines of the summit.

"Polluter pays should be on the table."

Pacific leaders will mount a renewed push later this week for a homegrown climate adaptation fund, an idea that largely hinges on financial contributions from foreign nations.

They will also push to speed the transition away from oil, gas and other highly polluting fuel sources.

"We cannot address climate change without addressing the root cause, which is the fossil fuel industry," Talia said.

"It's disaster after disaster, and we are losing the capacity to rebuild, to withstand another cyclone or another flood."

That is awkward terrain for forum member Australia, a coal-mining superpower belatedly trying to burnish its green credentials.

Australia wants to co-host the COP31 climate conference alongside its Pacific neighbours in 2026.

But first, it must convince the bloc it is serious about slashing emissions.



United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (C) attends the Pacific Islands Forum in Nuku'alofa on August 26, 2024.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is making a rare appearance at the summit, in a trip designed to highlight the Pacific's myriad climate threats.

"The decisions world leaders take in the coming years will determine the fate, first of Pacific Islanders, and then everyone else," Guterres said.

"If we save the Pacific, we save the world."

Security split

Foreign dignitaries were briefly sent scuttling for cover when a 6.9 magnitude earthquake struck off Tonga's coast early Monday. But no major damage or injuries were reported, and no tsunami warning was issued.

The summit had earlier kicked off with melodic Tongan choir singers and dancing schoolchildren in traditional dress.

Beneath the bonhomie, however, rare fissures have been forming in the 18-member bloc, with Pacific nations torn over China's security ambitions in the region.

"We gather at a pivotal time in our region's history," said forum secretary Baron Waqa, a former president of Nauru.

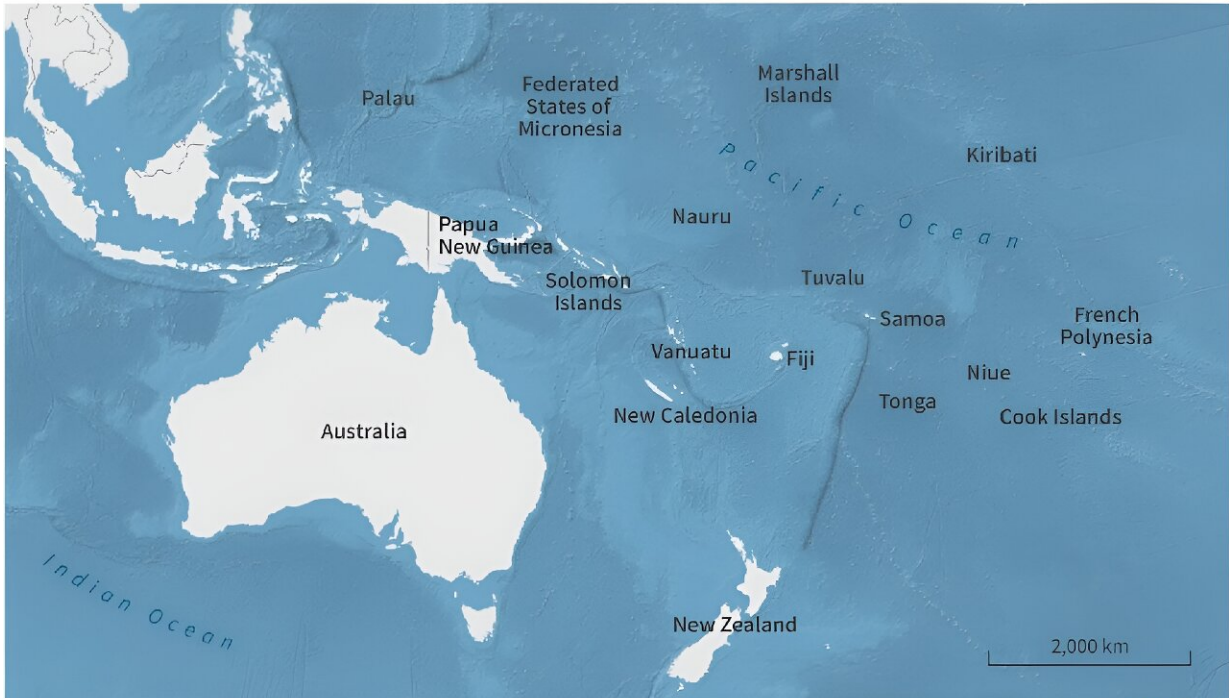
"We are at the center of global geopolitical interest."

China's interest, specifically, was evident long before Waqa's opening speech.

Large "China Aid" signs were installed outside the newly built conference venue, a \$25 million gift from Beijing.

Pacific Islands Forum

Founded in 1971



Source: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat

AFP 

Map showing the member nations of the Pacific Islands Forum.

The United States, meanwhile, has dispatched senior diplomat Kurt Campbell to lead its forum delegation.

Campbell has been one of the key figures behind a US-led push to keep China's Pacific ambitions in check.

"We need to remain vigilant on issues of regional security," warned Waqa, who has taken a dim view of the escalating Beijing-Washington rivalry in the past.

New Caledonia crisis

The other pressing security challenge facing Pacific leaders is the unresolved crisis in French territory New Caledonia, which reared its head on opening day.

"We must reach consensus on our vision for a region of peace and security," said Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni.

"We must honor the vision of our forefathers regarding self determination, including in New Caledonia."

Much of New Caledonia's ethnically Melanesian Kanak population fears that recent voting reforms put forward by Paris could crush their dreams of independence.

It is a cause that resonates widely in the Pacific bloc, which is stacked with former colonies now fiercely proud of their hard-won sovereignty.

The fractious topic of deep-sea mining does not sit on any official agenda, but will likely be a topic of heated debate behind closed doors.

Forum host Tonga sits at the vanguard of nations eager to open up the emerging industry, joined by fellow forum members Nauru and the Cook Islands.

But others such as Samoa, Palau and Fiji see it as an environmental catastrophe in the making, giving their full-throated backing to an international moratorium.

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