

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks During a Meeting With Leaders of Small Island Nations in Issy-les-Moulineaux, France

December 1, 2015

It's been a great pleasure to meet with several of the leaders of island nations who are vital to the work that we're doing here in Paris. Their populations are among the most vulnerable to the ravages of climate change. If sea levels rise at currently projected levels, or the pace that is currently projected, some of their people will be forced to flee their homes. Some of their nations could disappear entirely. And as weather patterns change, we might deal with tens of millions of climate refugees from the Asia-Pacific region.

And as I mentioned to my friends around the table, I'm an island boy. I grew up on an island and understand both the beauty, but also the fragility of island ecosystems. I spent time in Indonesia, a large developing country where you could see how shifts in climate could have extraordinarily destructive effects. And so the views of these smaller nations, their voice in these negotiations, will be absolutely vital.

And one of the things that we've heard—the consensus between the United States and these small island nations—is that we have to have an ambitious agreement; that although the targets themselves may not have the force of treaties, the process, the procedures that ensure transparency and periodic reviews, that needs to be legally binding, and that's going to be critical in us having high ambitions and holding each other accountable for those ambitions; that the climate financing has to reflect the unique needs of the most vulnerable countries in how it operates, and that those pledges have to be real.

And as part of the effort to make sure that the United States is doing its part, even ahead of the Paris agreement, we've already begun to take some steps and work with both individual countries, as well as some multilateral organizations, to deal with the damage and problems that are already occurring as a consequence of climate change.

To give you one example, the United States is making new contributions to risk-insurance initiatives aimed at helping more people in vulnerable nations, including Pacific Island nations, respond to the worst impacts of climate change. And this demonstrates our commitment to make good on the goal that we set this summer at the G-7 to provide this kind of risk insurance to another 400 million people. And we're joining with other donor nations in setting up these kinds of structures.

The bottom line is this. The nations that are represented by the leaders who are here today, they're not the most populous nations. They don't have big armies, may not have the most influence in international organizations. But as Prime Minister O'Neill indicated from Papua New Guinea, they have a right to the dignity and sense of place and continuity of culture that everybody else does. And their voice is vital in making sure that the kind of agreement that emerges here in Paris is not just serving the interests of the most powerful, but is serving the interests of the most vulnerable as well.

And the United States intends to stand with them as a partner in this process. We know that negotiations will be difficult. And by the way, we know that even with an optimistic outcome here in Paris, that we'll still have more work to do in order to ultimately achieve the

goals that scientists say we need to achieve to avert catastrophic damage. But this is the place to start.

And I just want to thank the leaders who have been a part of this conversation. I'm encouraged by the general consensus that we were able to achieve. And we want to send our negotiators off with a sense that they have the strong support of their leadership behind them.

So thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:44 p.m. at the OECD Development Centre. Participating in the meeting were President Anote Tong of Kiribati; President Christopher Jorebon Loeak of the Marshall Islands; Prime Minister Peter Paire O'Neill of Papua New Guinea; Prime Minister Kenny Anthony of Saint Lucia; and Prime Minister Freundel Stuart of Barbados. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 3.

Category : Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Small island nation leaders

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