



World Chronicle

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“Small Island Nations in the Eye of the Storm”

Tropical storms battered the Caribbean in 2004, causing death, destruction, and damage to property. Much of the media coverage focused on the unfolding tragedy of hurricane Jeanne aftermath in Haiti – yet there is a broader story to be told: natural disasters carry an annual price tag of US\$60 billion, and many disasters occur in small island nations. These countries are also the most vulnerable to the threat of global climate change.

How are small islands developing states (SIDS) preparing for the possible rise in the earth’s sea-levels? How will they compensate for economic losses due to natural disasters? Can developed countries be convinced that protecting the small islands is in their interest too? These are some of the issues explored in this edition of **World Chronicle** with guest Diane Quarless, Chief of UN’s Small Islands Developing States Unit.

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ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**.

VIDEO ROLL-IN

JENKINS: Scenes from the Haitian city of Gonaïves in the wake of tropical storm Jeanne... The damage spared neither animals, nor property nor people. And while death and destruction were visited upon Haiti -- one of the hardest-hit places in 2004 -- that Caribbean nation was not alone. Most island nations across the world suffer greatly, and repeatedly, from natural disasters. They're also most vulnerable to the threat of global climate change.

VIDEO OUT

JENKINS: Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins and this is **World Chronicle**.

Today we're talking about some of the big issues facing small islands in the developing world – after a season that has left many of them battered by tropical storms. Our guest is the Chief of the Small Islands Developing States Unit in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations. **Diane Quarless**, welcome to World Chronicle. Let's start off straight away from the point of view of small island developing states. Tell me, how urgent is the problem of global climate change? Aren't some small islands actually at risk of disappearing off the face of the earth, places like the Maldives, places like Tuvalu? How serious is this problem?

QUARLESS: It is extremely serious. It is, in fact, a most important issue before Small Island Developing States and

JENKINS: The most important issue...

QUARLESS: The most important issue. It took priority attention at the Barbados Programme of Action for Small Island Developing States, which was adopted in 1994, which has chartered the work on the vulnerability of states over the past ten years. There are, in fact, about five or six islands that are particularly vulnerable and you've mentioned some of them.

JENKINS: Literally threatening

QUARLESS: Literally...Yes.

JENKINS: What kind of a population are we talking about?

QUARLESS: Some of them are small. In the case of Tuvalu, for example, it's under ten thousand persons. The islands are no more than three or four kilometers wide. In most cases one to two meters high.

JENKINS: One to two meters above sea level?

QUARLESS: Above sea level, yes, above sea level.

JENKINS: How long to they have before they could be swirled under the water?

QUARLESS: In current estimates of the intergovernmental panel on climate change, if we continue increasing the world's average mean temperature from between one and five percent degrees Celsius, we will have between nine and eighty-eight centimeters increase in the sea level within the next hundred years. That's almost three meters? And it takes only six inches in increase, in the levels of the sea to have significant effects on the environment.

JENKINS: So what sort of time frame are we talking about for these people?

QUARLESS: Well, it depends, because we are talking about an average here. But depending on which region you are, local temperatures can be, in fact, higher. But in fact we have seen in the case of Tuvalu, particularly they have the king tides where we already see the threat of these islands disappearing. We've already seen, in the case of the Maldives, islands have disappeared and in fact they had to divert ODA intended for education to build the sea wall around the principle island of Malé.

JENKINS: ODA is Overseas Development Aid?

QUARLESS: Overseas Development Assistance, yes.

JENKINS: Assistance, sorry. We are joined in the studio today by Thalif Deen of the InterPress Service and by the incomparable Linda Fasulo of NBC. Linda.

FASULO: Can I ask youwe know that there have been these recent hurricanes and storms, particularly in the Caribbean. In terms of we know that these, obviously with climate change we can expect many more, but what do you think that the nations could do? Governments can do right now, in terms of trying to mitigate future disasters? Or, for example with regarding Haiti, what would be the big things, perhaps, that governments can do to prevent a repeat of the devastation that took place? Maybe from a social-economic level, we know that there will be national disasters, but what can governments really do to help the people looking forward?

QUARLESS: Ok, well you are asking for a social and domestic perspective but I will want to say that in terms of climate change it was one of the issues that we brought to the

international community indicating that the threat of environmental destruction was one that required international cooperation. So our Barbados programme of action was the first call for international responsibility, recognizing that because of the increased green house gas emissions, GHGs, which really cause the climate change, which is caused by increased industrialization in the developed countries, there is a need for cooperation for the part of the developed countries. And this brings us of course to the issues of the Kyoto Protocol and so on. But of course So apart from the need for there to be an international cooperation in order to address the long term concerns of climate change, there are, of course, national and regional attempts to redress in all of the regions where there are small islands. In the Caribbean, for example, there is a Caribbean plan for adaptation to climate change, which was recently been developed into a mainstreaming for adaptation to climate change, and let me explain what that is. It is a part of the fulfillment of the requirement of the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which ensures that these countries which are particularly vulnerable have the opportunity to assess their vulnerability, let us say, how low to sea level are they? What is the level of coastal erosion? What is the damage to the reefs? What is the level of salt water intrusion. You assess each of these and then you map a strategy to redress each of them. So there are scientists within the region addressing this, at a regional level. This is a regional programme. At the domestic level, there is, of course, acknowledgment that climate change is exacerbated by what we call anthropogenic or what we call man-made factors, poverty. And so, for example in the case of Haiti, the denuding of the hillsides for firewood, because that's the principle source of energy for poor people compounded by the droughts which is also an aspect of climate change results in bare hillsides, which when then you get a heavy flood of rain it brings everything down in a mudslide. So it is because of that desertification brought upon by poverty and a combination of environmental factors that then you have a disaster much greater than it might have been.

JENKINS: Let's bring Talif ... on this

DEEN: You refer to the 1994 Barbados Programme of action.

QUARLESS: Yes.

DEEN: I believe this was a conference held in Barbados, primarily to help small island developing states. You had a programme of action but ten years later, you are planning to have another conference in Mauritius 2005. Now the international community made certain commitments. Now is it true that the second conference is being held primarily because the international community failed to meet its commitments made in Barbados ten years ago?

QUARLESS: It's one way of putting it. We would like to say that we are using the opportunity to review the responsibilities not only of the international community but of the countries themselves because they recognize that the principle responsibility for their sustainable development lies with them and therefore it is an opportunity to review how well have we done in our effort to implement the strategy and it is an interdisciplinary strategy for sustainable development that covers a wide range of issues in the Barbados programme. So that is part of the effort to ensure that governments strengthen their policies and engage their communities in ensuring that they further develop the Barbados programme of action. But most importantly, there is an acknowledgement that the international commitment to partnership that was made in 1994 has not been fulfilled.

DEEN: Is this in terms of development assistance?

QUARLESS: Official development assistance in particular, the support through training, through technology, transfer in the development of information and communication technology. A wide range of issues. Most importantly, also, trade. And we have during the course of globalization become increasingly marginalized and it has, taking into consideration also the fact most small islands are economically vulnerable and are what we call price takers.

JENKINS: Hang on a moment. I don't get this... We are talking about the possibility of these islands literally being wiped off the face of the earth because of the problem of climate change and you're focusing on how they can go about creating sustainable development. Isn't that the wrong the focus? Shouldn't you all be banging together to cry out, first and foremost about tackling the issue of climate change? I mean, there was a report issued by the United Nations, it might even have been by your office, I read recently this summer, in which the UN said that within fifty years the number of people who could be affected by severe flooding because of climate change will be two billion people. The chief scientist of Great Britain said, a short while ago, that the major problem facing the world today is not terrorism but climate change. How come you could be talking about sustainable development trade and what have you, when these places that we are talking about: Mauritius where you are having your conference, after all, had to delay the conference because of typhoon because it was being washed by these rising sea levels? Aren't you focusing on the wrong place?

QUARLESS: There is really so much that you can do, and in fact we are finding that climate change is linked integrally. Our islands are too small to focus on one aspect and one aspect affects all aspects and therefore in order to mitigate the effects of climate change we must address the broader sustainable development issues. Now

JENKINS: So.. wait. Let me get this right. So what you are saying is we can't stop climate change so we got to find a way to live with it. Is that what you are saying?

QUARLESS: Well, let me say this. That the UNFCC...

JENKINS: FC C is?

QUARLESS: The Framework Convention on Climate Change encouraged all countries to reduce by 2000 to their levels of greenhouse gas emission of 1990. That was too soft. So the Kyoto Protocol came in, that said ... Let us see if between the years 2008 to 2012 we can reduce, to five percent below 1990 levels. But that five percent is only five percent of the sixty percent that we need in order to redress the climate change. So even if the US ratifies the Kyoto Protocol and we now have Russia on board, and even all the countries pursue the Protocol, the Kyoto Protocol, to the ultimate and we achieve it, we are still only five percent of sixty percent. So to answer your question directly, yes, climate change, the effects of climate change are marching faster than the international community is ready to address and redress and therefore this is why the developing countries are focusing on adaptation. And that adaptation includes addressing the broader sustainable development issues.

JENKINS: Linda.

FASULO: Diane, there are some forty small island developing countries that we're talking about? Right?

QUARLESS: Those are the states, yes...territories as well that are not independent.

FASULO: Which even makes is a larger issue. But if you have forty some countries....what kind of population overall are we talking about? And also what percentage of them are really, perhaps, you know like Maldives, being threatened with going under?

QUARLESS: The total population of is not more that 20/25 million because the average small island developing state is under a million people. You have a few, like Papua New Guinea and Jamaica. Papua New Guinea has over three million. Jamaica just under three million. We have some anomalies, like Cuba for example, that is close to eleven million but for the most part, the average size is seventy, eighty, a hundred and fifty, two hundred and fifty thousand persons.

JENKINS: So does that mean that the international community can think of them as expendable?

QUARLESS: Well this is what we are concerned about. You know...

JENKINS: You literally worry that they'll say "Let them go.."?

QUARLESS: Absolutely, we really are concerned about this.

JENKINS: So shouldn't your role be to be the canary in the coalmine.... so to speak. To say "Look, if we go, it's not just us. We are just a presage of what's going to happen in the future". I mean there was another report this year by the Association of Insurers that said the average cost each year now of these tropical storms, hurricanes and what have you, I think is sixty billion dollars. Those dollars are not being paid by the small island states. These are being paid by the big boys, by the United States, and Europe and what have you, aren't they?

QUARLESS: Well, what we're finding is that these costs are being transferred to the countries and the cost of reinsurance has become so prohibitive that what you are finding is increasingly these islands are not insured. You know, you go through one of these hurricanes that devastates, as in the case of Grenada, ninety percent of your infrastructural stock and it's impossible to get Lloyds of London or one of these to assume the risk.

JENKINS: I don't know but let me just say that this is **World Chronicle**, and we're talking, amongst other things, about the impact of natural disasters on Small Island Developing States. Our guest is **Diane Quarless**, of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and here's a video about what one UN agency – UNICEF – has been able to do to help people hit by natural disasters in the Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea:

VIDEO ROLL-IN

Audio In: " An all too familiar scene in Papua New Guinea, one of the most disaster prone..."

Audio out: "...thousands of men, women and children benefited. Less than six months after the deadly earthquake the island's life was back to normal."

VIDEO OUT

JENKINS: Back to normal. I'm sure that's what a lot of people in the Caribbean are wishing for at this moment. Tell me, do you think that UN agencies like UNICEF are actually going to be able to continue to provide the aid to get people to get over these increasing number of storms that we are seeing?

QUARLESS: It's going to be a real challenge because, of course, contributions to these agencies have declined. Agencies like the UNDP, their core contributions have been shrinking.

JENKINS: As the problem gets worse the amount of money coming in is dropping .

QUARLESS: Gets less. Absolutely and it becomes a real challenge for them to respond to the magnitude and the frequencies of these disasters. Consider that instead of just addressing the concerns of Grenada they have to be dealing with Jamaica and Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

DEEN: When you speak of small island developing states, let's get down to basics, what is the criteria for a small island developing state? Because, I see two extremes because you get countries like Singapore which has international reserves of eighty-five billion dollars at last count, that's a billion with a "B" and you get a country like Guinea Bissau which per capita income is two hundred and twenty six dollars and you get Cyprus, you have Bahrain. Don't you think that you should start by redefining what small island developing states are before you could go to this conference?

QUARLESS: This is a real challenge, I will admit and one that will, I think, engage the international community for some time to come. What the small island developing states themselves say that there are particular challenges which all these islands have in common. And might I say, that Cyprus and Malta have gone on to greener pastures? Yes, they have joined the European Union. Singapore, however, remains an integral member of our fold. The issue of environmental vulnerability has not received, within the formal assessments of the UN system, the recognition that it deserves. There is no real robust measure or proxy for measuring environmental vulnerability. So it does not take into consideration, at all. However the size of these islands, their exposure to these frequent and recurring storms is one of the issues, which makes all small island states vulnerable. There are other issues: there are resource base, the size not only in geographic terms but in terms of their administrative capacity. In other words, the human resource capacity and the technical

DEEN: Who decided on these 41 countries? Is it the General Assembly?

QUARLESS: They were a grouping that came together, I think, politically, coming out of the 1992 Rio Conference.

DEEN: Guyana is not even an island!

QUARLESS: No but it is a coastal state. It has a sea coast that is below sea level or at sea level.

JENKINS: If the sea continues to rise up, it might end up being an island.

QUARLESS: Well, it certainly has a threat of disappearing.

FASULO: Diane, you've said that a lot of these governments don't have insurance any longer because it is too expensive? So, for example, with the recent devastation that occurred, who's stepping in besides governments? I mean are there, for example, are there many corporate contributions? Is the private sectors, perhaps, within those countries that are doing business there stepping up to the plate and contributing or where is all this money going to come from?

QUARLESS: Absolutely, there is very strong response from large private sector entities within the countries, in Jamaica, for example. This is not really the case in some of the smaller islands like Grenada, but there is significant support coming from the international system. The UN agencies and the World Bank has contributed a significant amount but they really are going to be depending, as they have in the past, on their resilience, on their ability to bounce back, to get their crops back up again, exports moving again, to increase their GDP, GNP so that they can pull themselves up again. This is how it has always been. This is why small islands are the children of Sisyphus. Constantly pushing that rock uphill, constantly running back down under.

JENKINS: It seems to me that what you are saying is that you can't really do anything without the international community rallying behind you.

QUARLESS: That's it.

JENKINS: What can you do to convince the international community that they need to?

QUARLESS: Well, which of you has not taken a vacation in one of these islands? What would you do without them? That's the first thing. Second thing. Do you know that the eastern coast of the United States is also under threat of inundation as we speak?

JENKINS: This is something that the American government doesn't acknowledge though, is it? Even if they do acknowledge it, they say that the costs of doing something about it outweigh the costs of simply adapting to the change. Do you dispute that approach?

QUARLESS: I think the people in Florida and Delaware would dispute that, those who have investments in real estate there. No. This is merely a harbinger of things to come, and if we think within the myopic framework of our own lifetime then we can ignore it. But what about our children's children? We are talking about a world that's supposed to live another thousand years. At the rate that we are going, it won't. And we are the town criers. We are saying that what happens to us will ultimately happen to you. When it happens to you, we

probably won't be around, we will already have gone under the sea. But it will ultimately happen.

JENKINS: But, presumably before that happens a lot of people are going to be immigrating, there will be refugees out of the Caribbean, refugees from various different parts of the world.

QUARLESS: That's another issue.

DEEN: That reminds me, we talk of political refugees and economic refugees. I was reading the other day, there is a new category of refugees called environmental refugees. People who are fleeing from these countries to other countries, is that true?

QUARLESS: Serious consideration has been given to evacuating Tuvalu and I'm sure the people of Tuvalu would never ever contemplate it. But given the fact that the narrow strips of land that they have are in serious threat of inundation.....

JENKINS: Where would you evacuate them to? Who's going to take them?

QUARLESS: Well.... that's a good question.

JENKINS: Has anybody offered?

QUARLESS: I think there was discussion in the region. Yes

JENKINS: Let's play devil's advocate for a moment. How can you convince the taxpayers in industrialized countries that there's an interest in doing something about this? You say.. well you could tell them that they would not be able to go to the Caribbean islands on vacations any more, it doesn't sound to me like a very serious argument. Shouldn't you be beating the drums and saying these people are going to be refugees, they are going to be storming your shores. Shouldn't you be saying New York is going to sink under the waves? Shouldn't that be your focus.

QUARLESS: You know, usually you try to convince and there is always the impression of the private sector as the rapacious and greedy beast and so you have to appeal to them on their terms. But sometimes you need to appeal to these agencies, appeal to their sense of corporate responsibility, appeal to that higher ideal that's in all of them. I think that there is a need for us to communicate the importance of doing something because it's right. Because there is really I mean the Kyoto Protocol allows them to buy clean air

JENKINS: Dianne Quarless .. an appeal to the world's moral conscience. That sounds like a good note to end on.

Our guest has been Diane QUARLESS, Chief of the Small Islands Developing States Unit -- in the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs. She was interviewed by Thalif Deen of the InterPress Service and Linda Fasulo of NBC.

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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