



FIJI AND TUVALU'S FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE

Report on the visit of the France-Vanuatu-Pacific Islands interparliamentary friendship group to Fiji and Tuvalu

September 7th-16th, 2016

A delegation from the France-Vanuatu-Pacific Islands interparliamentary friendship group composed of Ms Catherine Procaccia, group President, Mr Robert Laufoaulu, Deputy Chairman for Fiji, Mr Jean-François Longeot, Vice-President, and Ms Delphine Bataille, travelled to Fiji and Tuvalu from 7th to 16th September 2016.

Following numerous talks at the Senate (Fijian ministers for Foreign Affairs, Fisheries, Agriculture and Natural Disasters Management), a conference on the consequences of global warming over the Pacific Islands, as well as the historical signing, in December 2015, of the Paris Agreement, the trip aimed at further examining the impact of this phenomenon on two Oceanian states whose lives may be directly threatened by climate change. The objective in particular was to assess the actual effects of rising sea levels on people's daily lives and to get to know the actions carried out to prevent them.

The members of the delegation wish to thank Mr Michel Djokovic, French Ambassador in Suva, Mr Jules Irrmann, Minister-counsellor, and Mr Christian Lechervy, Ambassador and Representative of France to the Pacific Community, for this outstandingly well-organised mission. They were able to discuss with local authorities, diplomats and French expatriates and given an opportunity to visit areas devastated by cyclone Winston in February 2016, one of the most severe tropical cyclones to have hit the region. In Fiji and Tuvalu, the delegates met with populations who, despite being dramatically exposed to natural disasters, remain profoundly attached to their ancestral land. This strong will, which can also be found at the highest institutional level, should be a major asset for the future of these small, vulnerable states, currently engaged in a "race against time".

I. Fiji, an evolving country

Since Fiji gained independence in 1970, its history has been marked with several coups fuelled by the rivalry between the Melanesian population (making up approximately 60% of the entire population), socially organised around a traditional system of chiefdom and collective land ownership, and people of Indian origin (40%) sent in by the British Empire to work on sugarcane plantations. After the last coup led in 2006 by Chief of Armed Forces Voreqe Bainimarama and the dissolution of the Parliament, Fiji was boycotted by the international community. The adoption of a new Constitution in September 2013 and the holding of free parliamentary elections in September 2014 (with 7 parties competing and an almost 80% voter turnout) made Fiji democratic again and enabled it to successfully come back on the international stage.



The delegation, together with Mr Bainimarama, Fijian Prime Minister (centre) and Mr Djokovic, Ambassador (left)

A – The return to parliamentary democracy

The delegates, who arrived on Constitution Day, were able to attend the solemn opening of the parliamentary session in Suva. The Parliament consists of a single House with 50 members elected for four years, modelled on the Westminster system. With 32 elected

members, *Fiji First*, the Prime Minister's party, gives the government a comfortable majority.

Starting his address with Fiji's successful return to democracy, President of the Republic Mr Jioji Konrote welcomed the French delegation and mentioned the two countries' "shared values of freedom, equality and fraternity".

He warmly thanked France for its humanitarian assistance, including aerial reconnaissance and transport planes provided by the French Army in the framework of the FRANZ Agreement (between France, Australia and New Zealand).



The delegation together with Ms Jiko Luveni, President of the Parliament, and Mr Michel Djokovic

Ms Jiko Luveni, Speaker of the Parliament, heard the delegates and invited them to a working lunch together with members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. She confirmed the gradual reinstating of parliamentary institutions and reminded that 80% of MP's had never served a mandate. Discussions were held on various topics, including: the participation of women, many of whom were promoted to key positions (President, Secretary General and Executive Director, Leader of the Opposition...), future strengthening of interparliamentary relations (creation of a Fiji-France friendship group and visits to France) and the desirable reinforcement of ties with the three French territories in the Pacific. Ms Procaccia's suggestion that France should welcome the winners of the "Constitution competition" (who were awarded a trip to "a country with a strong democratic tradition") was met with an enthusiastic response.

Talks with the Prime Minister, the Finance minister and the acting minister of Foreign Affairs also informed the delegates about various **structural reforms** currently led by the government aiming at institutional stability and strengthened national unity, such as: treating education as a priority, developing transportation infrastructures especially in rural areas, improving the social safety net, and supporting local projects (through "resource centres" in villages). One of Fiji's major assets is that it is **one of the most developed**

economies in the region. It has succeeded in promoting its tourism sector (755,000 visitors in 2015) and its mining industry, while maintaining its fishing and sugar industries (10% of the GNP), thus becoming a new regional hub.

At the headquarters of the Asian Development Bank, Ms Caroline Currie, Unit Head, Economics and Programming, of the Pacific Subregional Office, emphasized the positive impact of structural and financial reforms: the Fijian economy is experiencing one of its most significant growth cycles since it gained independence, with a 4 to 5% yearly growth rate since 2010 and optimistic short and medium-term forecasts. Such dynamism enables this small, relatively populated state (900,000 inhabitants) to influence the region well beyond its borders. The delegates were able to share their thoughts with Finance minister Mr Aiyaz Sayed-Khayum regarding major regional projects such as the call for tender for the Wallis and Futuna air service or the future cable linking Samoa to Fiji, funded by the World Bank and the European Union.

B – The climate challenge

In February 2016, cyclone Winston claimed 44 lives, destroyed 40,000 houses and caused damages worth more than one billion US dollars. **Fiji**, which is made up of two large islands and 300 smaller coral islands, **is also on the front line of climate change**, as reminded – with films supporting their statement – by the authorities of the Ra province (West of Viti Levu) where the delegates travelled.

In Verevere and Nayaukoso, dozens of families still live in tents and are waiting to be relocated on higher grounds with the help of the European Union, neighbouring countries such as Australia, and NGOs (Oxfam). Around forty villages are currently under threat of rising sea levels, particularly during ever more violent and frequent cyclones, and will have to be relocated within five to ten years. International aid largely goes toward the construction of barriers around villages for the protection of houses and agricultural lands.



Tour of the devastated village of Verevere, in the Ra province

The delegates also talked with the people in charge of the RESCCUE programme – funded by the French Development Agency (AFD) and the French Global Environment Facility (FFEM) – and of the PaCE-SD (Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development) at the University of the South Pacific, which hosts approximately 29,000 students on 15 campuses and trains many Oceanian leaders.

A staunch advocate of the “1.5°C objective” at the COP21 and a very active member of the spearheading Melanesian Group, Fiji naturally became a **mouthpiece for small Pacific Island States**. Its Prime Minister took part in the 4th France-Oceania Summit and in the Paris Conference, and the Fijian Parliament was one of the first to adopt the Agreement as of February 2016. Fiji offers to welcome future “climate refugees” from Kiribati or Tuvalu and ensure their food safety. This matter is currently under scrutiny at the ministry of Justice, in particular as to the legal problems it may entail.

Now back in the group of **important Oceanian powers**, together with Australia and New Zealand, Fiji gathers in its capital city approximately twenty embassies as well as most regional UN offices in the Pacific and, due to the Pacific area's management by the European Development Fund (700 million Euros), a large European delegation (60 agents). The friendship group delegates were able to measure the scope of Fiji's strategic importance as they met the various foreign ambassadors invited at the *Résidence de France* and discussed with General Philippe Léonard, Superior Commander of New Caledonia's Armed Forces, calling at Suva on the *Vendémiaire* frigate.

Without denying existing tensions, the delegates felt Fiji's genuine willingness to open up and develop for the future.

One of the world's four smallest States, with a population of 11,000 inhabitants of Polynesian origin, half of whom live in the capital island of Funafuti, Tuvalu is made up of nine islands, very narrow atolls that seem to be floating on water. This country, which is meant to disappear within fifty years from now, has become **the global symbol of climate emergency**. The delegates received an exceptionally warm welcome in that end-of-the-world archipelago connected by only two flights a week.

A - Extreme vulnerability

Tuvalu is ridden with many difficulties and hard to run, as Mr Otinielu Tausi, President of the Parliament, explained during his interview with the delegates. The Parliament is composed of 15 members elected for four years, who appoint the Head of Government by a majority. However, it has no facilities: the MP'S meet in a communal room and rarely sit since the agenda is set by the government – 8 ministers who also double up as MP'S. A constitutional review is currently underway but the government, which has the majority in Parliament, may easily oppose it. Mr Tausi also presented an ambitious building project over the lagoon (for which funding still needs to be secured) which would connect to the island by a bridge and where the MP'S and, should the case arise, visiting foreign delegates, would sit and be accommodated. The building would also contain survival foodstuffs and be used as a shelter for the population in case of a cyclone or rising waters.



Funafuti's main road, lined with the ocean on the left and the lagoon on the right

II. Tuvalu, struggling to survive



The delegation with Mr Toafa, acting Prime Minister of Tuvalu

Indeed, Tuvalu's major challenge is the fight against rising sea levels, up by 10 cm since the 1990s, made even worse by **groundwater salinisation and coastal erosion caused by the unprecedented scale of tides and winds**. As explained by Mr Maatia Toafa, minister of Finance and Economic Development, Tuvalu now relies almost solely on international aid. Its economic foundation is limited to subsistence farming and small-scale fishing. Financial transfers have considerably gone down since the number of seamen employed by foreign shipping companies has decreased (they are seven times less numerous since the crisis), as was confirmed by a visit of the Maritime Training Institute.

Public revenues essentially come from the selling of fishing licences and of the “.tv” Internet domain to television channels worldwide.

Besides, since land ownership is customary, the government can only intervene if owner families agree to it. This is one of the reasons why traditional “chief councils” are still closely associated with local life in terms of priority development plans, infrastructure improvement, resource management, etc.



Waste management briefing in Funafuti

As a consequence, the local economy relies heavily on Australia : the Australian dollar is the local currency and Australia has equipped the archipelago with rainwater tanks. However, as the delegates could gather from the roads and port facilities, the electrification system and the signs attached to the various “donations”, international aid comes from a wide variety of sources: UN agencies, the World Bank (particularly in the field of secondary education and for the rehabilitation of the Northern islands, devastated by cyclone Pam in 2015), the European Union (especially for the problematic question of waste management, organised on specific sites which the delegation visited), but also bilateral aid programmes from Japan, New Zealand (for sea links) or economically and culturally very active Taiwan.

B – Spirit of resistance

In such a context, it is admirable that no village had to be relocated yet and that most families should want to stay there. Interior minister Mr Namoliki Neemia reminded that following the disastrous impact of cyclone Pam in 2015, the government decided to carry out a major infrastructure building project with the construction of **protective walls and breakwaters** on three atolls.

This project will be financed by the Green Climate Fund (established in the wake of the Paris Agreement) to the tune of 36 million US dollars.





During their exchanges with the National Advisory Committee on Climate Change (NACCC), the delegates were shown an overview of the project, from the **construction of barriers with sand extracted from the lagoon to the setting up of alert and disaster management committees in each island:** creation of a network linked to the police and the national agency, satellite phone monitoring or through a new Internet messaging service, radio alert systems for the population.

*

Overall, this stay gave the Senators an opportunity to observe the very positive effects of the COP21 on the frame of mind of these insular populations and their inspiringly combative leaders, and on France's image as a powerful presence in the region, showing solidarity with these Pacific populations.

Above all, the delegation noticed significant and encouraging progress in the **clear-sighted acknowledgment of threats, and the ability to draw lessons from disasters past and decide on pragmatic measures for the common good**, in these countries condemned to “*move forward lest they should disappear*”.

Members of the delegation

			
Ms Catherine PROCACCIA President of friendship group Senator of Val-de-Marne (<i>The Republicans</i>)	Mr Robert LAUFOAULU Deputy Chairman for Fiji, Senator of Wallis and Futuna (attached to <i>The Republicans</i>)	Mr Jean-François LONGEOT Vice-President of the group, Senator of Doubs (<i>UDI-UC</i>)	Ms Delphine BATAILLE Group member, Senator of the North (<i>Socialist and Republican group</i>)

Members of the Friendship Group: http://www.senat.fr/groupe-interparlementaire-amitie/ami_651.html