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Thousands of climate activists from across the world gather in Bonn, Germany, Nov. 4, just before the start of COP23, the U.N. climate conference. The march was called "Fight for Climate Justice. End Coal!" (CNS photo/Sean Hawkey, courtesy World Council of Churches)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

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broewe@ncronline.org

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With the annual United Nations climate change conference under way, COP23 has taken the gathering somewhere it hasn’t gone before, well sort of.

The physical host of the latest global climate summit (Nov. 6-17) is Bonn, Germany, where the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change has its headquarters. But presiding over COP23 is Fiji, the first time a Pacific island has held the role.

The position holds significance in that the low-lying islands have played the role of canary in the mine of international climate negotiations: sounding the alarm as they've witnessed their homelands awash with rising sea waters, and urgently crying out for the global community to act before it's too late.

"Fiji being the chair this year sort of brings it home," said Rebecca Eastwood, advocacy coordinator for the Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach.

Since 1951, the Missionary Society of St. Columban has served the people in Fiji, and its missionaries there today witness firsthand the devastation climate change has brought: high tides getting higher, water tables rising, more frequent flooding.

In an upcoming podcast for the Columban Center, Lani Tamatawale, a Columban lay missionary in Fiji, described how one village experience two floods in a short period of time, the second coming as the new school years was beginning.

“It was really hard to see that when people are still trying to get back on their feet,” Tamatawale said.

As seas swallow more and more shoreline in Pacific islands, its leaders have begun facing the difficult decision of displacement for some of the 1.7 million who call the islands home, a process that first began on Fiji in 2012. The island itself has taken in climate refugees from neighboring Kiribati.

"They won't have anywhere to go. And so I think that's as stark an example as you can find on the impacts on small island nations," Eastwood said.

The all-call for urgency and recommitment to the Paris Agreement is expected to be a prevalent theme throughout the two weeks of COP23, in particular coming five months after President Donald Trump announced his intentions to withdraw the United States from the deal among 195 nations to commit to lowering average global temperature rise between 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius (2.7 to 3.6 Fahrenheit).

With Syria's announcement Nov. 7 it would sign onto the agreement, the U.S., while technically unable to exit until November 2020, is now the only nation in the world in opposition to the climate accord.

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But the increased calls for urgency don't draw solely from the U.S. idling on climate action. In the days leading up to COP23, several reports highlighted how the planet remains well short in terms of meeting the targets outlined in the Paris Agreement.

According to an Oct. 31 report from the U.N. Environment Program, national pledges to date would only bring about one-third of the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions required by 2030 to stay on target to meet the Paris goals, and result in global temperature rise of 3 degrees Celsius. A study of national commitments by Climate Action Tracker found no industrialized nation on track to meet their self-determined targets.

The first portion of the fourth National Climate Assessment, produced by law every four years by 13 federal agencies, determined average global temperatures have risen 1 degrees Celsius since 1901. As for the reason for the warming, it stated "it is extremely likely that human activities, especially the emissions of greenhouse gases, are the dominant cause." The scientific report added, "There is no convincing alternative explanation."

The U.N. Environment Program report said that closing the emissions gap requires "accelerated short-term action and enhanced longer-term national ambition," which includes a phase out of coal, stopping deforestation, and ramping up investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency measures.

In contrast, the Trump administration was expected to arrive in Bonn touting fossil fuels and nuclear energy as viable climate solutions, according to a report by The New York Times.

"We face a stark choice: up our ambition, or suffer the consequences," Edgar E. Gutiérrez-Espeleta, the Costa Rican environment minister and president of the 2017 U.N. Environment Assembly, said in a statement.

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The Paris Agreement, reached at COP21 in 2015, was developed in a way to encourage nations to increase their emissions reductions every few years. The first global stock-take of progress will be the major focus next year at COP24 in Poland; that process will then repeat every five years.

As for COP23, delegates will aim to create a "rulebook" for the agreement's implementation, in terms of how progress is assessed and how countries might increase emissions targets, with the first revision period set for 2020.

Faith groups hope Fiji's chairmanship rallies nations to recognize the need for increased ambition well before then.

"The world is grappling with a 'new normal,' " said CIDSE, a coalition of Catholic international development agencies, in its message ahead of COP23. "Chaotic weather patterns and climate-related disasters are a tangible reality, affecting countries and communities at the frontlines of climate change. It's time to act."

With his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis elevated the call for all "to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor," that poor and excluded peoples are not treated as an afterthought in political and economic discussions, but that their problems become a central focus.

That call presents Catholics with a special obligation to stand with poor and vulnerable communities as it relates to climate change, as they often experience the impacts of harsher droughts, floods and wildfires first and most acutely, said Wesley Cocozello, communications and outreach coordinator for the Columban Center.

"Unlike the industrialized western nations, the Fijian population in general doesn't have the resources to bounce back as quickly from disasters, like two floods within a

couple of months of each other," he told NCR. "So it's really incumbent upon us to look after our brothers and sisters."

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The Columban Center and other U.S.-based Catholic groups have used the timing of COP23 to urge Congress for continued financial support for the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — funding that Trump eliminated in his proposed budget.

The faith community at COP23 plan to show their solidarity and resolve for climate action by committing to more modest lifestyles. Through a statement organized by GreenFaith, religious leaders and people of faith have promised that while they push for systemic change to address climate change they will also adopt "compassionate simplicity" in their own lives and houses of worship. Specifically, they pledge to:

- dramatically reducing emissions from their energy usage;
- adopting a plant-based diet and reduce food waste;
- minimize air and automobile travel.

"Individual commitments and behaviors are as important in addressing climate change as they are in addressing poverty, racism, and other grave social ills. And we know that our spiritualties and traditions offer wisdom about finding happiness in a purposeful life, family and friendships, not in an overabundance of things. The world needs such wisdom; it is our privilege both to share and to seek to embody it," the statement read.

A procession of faith leaders, on foot and bicycle, will present the sustainable living statement to COP23 delegates on Nov. 10.

Other efforts from faith groups around COP23 include a daily prayer guide compiled by the Global Catholic Climate Movement. For each day of the conference, the guide features a different country and reflection highlighting a local way its people have experienced the effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

Like COP23 itself, the prayer guide opened with a focus on Fiji and other Pacific islands that are already dealing with rising seas:

"We pray that refugees from the climate crisis find peace and Fijian 'Bula vinaka,' or a spirit of welcome, in their new homes. We pray that migration policies include climate refugees among those who need special consideration."

Other prayers come from the Amazon, Caribbean islands, Nigeria and Australia.

Global Catholic Climate Movement has a delegation at COP23, and will hold a webinar Nov. 14 updating Catholics on what is happening in Bonn and what next steps the network of 400-plus Catholic organizations has planned in coming months.

Elsewhere, the Jesuits have scheduled a series of events throughout the 12 days in Bonn, including a free conference Nov. 13 examining how *Laudato Si*' can transform attitudes about natural resources. The event will highlight a diversity of voices, with speakers from India, Central Africa and Central America, as well as island nations Micronesia and the Philippines. A "*Laudato Si*' Fair" will follow to display actions already under way.

[Brian Roewe is an NCR staff writer. His email address is **broewe@ncronline.org**. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]