News
EarthBeat



United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres visits an house that has been abandoned due to storm damage and flooding as a result of climate change during his trip to Samoa on Aug. 22, 2024. (UN Photo/Kiara Worth)

Brett Wilkins

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United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres warned in Samoa on Thursday that low-lying Pacific island nations face the threat of "annihilation" from rising sea levels, cyclones, ocean heatwaves, and other dangers driven by human-caused climate chaos.

"High and rising sea levels pose an enormous threat to Samoa, to the Pacific, and to other small island developing states. These challenges demand resolute international action," Guterres said. "Sea levels are rising even faster than the global average, posing an existential threat to millions of Pacific Islanders."

Recalling the 2009 earthquake and tsunami that killed at least 192 people and devastated Samoa, Guterres said that "we have seen people that moved their houses inland, we have seen people that persisted coming back and rebuilding, we have seen an enormous determination of people to fight against, not only the impact of the tsunami, but the impacts of the rising sea levels and of the storms and the cyclones."

"I've seen a wall that is protecting a village from the sea; that wall in 20 years, because of the tsunami — because of the rising sea level, and because of the heavy storms — has already been built three times," he continued.

"People are suffering. Economies are being shattered. And entire territories face annihilation," Guterres stressed.

Guterres said Samoans' ambitious plans to tackle the "existential threat for millions" are being impeded by a lack of promised funding from rich nations. He pointed to the Loss and Damage Fund, agreed to in 2022 at the U.N. Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt, as well as rich countries' 2021 pledge to double climate adaptation funding to $200 billion.

"We are fighting hard for climate justice," said Guterres, but "we are not seeing the money that is needed and that's why we ask for the reform and the international financial institutions in order for the funding needs of countries, like Pacific countries, to be met."

"We need all countries to honor their promises on climate finance and a strong finance outcome from this year's COP where we will discuss the financial commitments after 2025," he added.

The devastation caused by the earthquake-generated tsunami is seen from an aerial view on

The devastation caused by the earthquake-generated tsunami is seen from an aerial view on the south coast of Samoa Sept. 30, 2009. A magnitude 8 undersea earthquake at dawn Sept. 29 set off a series of four giant waves. The disaster left more than 100 people dead, but the death toll was expected to rise. (CNS photo/New Zealand Defense Force, handout via Reuters)

COP29 — which has been criticized by green groups for being chaired by a former oil executive — is set to take place in Baku, Azerbaijan in November.

Low-lying Pacific island nations are among the least responsible for the climate emergency but are among the most adversely affected by the crisis. To help address this, Guterres reiterated his call for small island nations like Samoa to have access to $80 billion in development from special drawing rights (SDRs), which are reserve assets controlled by the International Monetary Fund that can be exchanged for cash. Rich countries can also place SDRs in a fund for developing nations' use.

The secretary-general also said that new income streams are key to the survival of nations like Samoa whose tourism industries were devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic and which "have not received the support of the international community."

"If we are not able to stop what is happening with climate change, this problem that we see in Samoa will not stay in Samoa," Guterres warned. "It will be happening more and more everywhere in all coastal areas, from New York to Shanghai, from Lagos to Bangkok."

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