

Presented by TSRA Chairperson John T Kris New York April 2010

**TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY INTERVENTION -
CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT ON VULNERABLE TORRES STRAIT COMMUNITIES**

Thank you Mister Chair.

The impact of climate change on vulnerable Torres Strait communities is now a significant challenge for future preservation and growth of the Torres Strait's culture and identity.

This is compounded by the effort to secure required resources from governments to take appropriate measures to mitigate adverse environmental, economic, cultural and spiritual impact caused by this issue.

Article 32, paragraph 1, of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, states that indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development, or use, of their lands or territories and other resources.

Torres Strait communities are already feeling the impact of rising sea levels and now every year during the summer when king tides are prevalent, our people's homes and sacred sites are inundated by the sea.

Damage is being recorded on basic infrastructure such as sea walls, roads, housing, sewerage, crops, and also has begun to wash away tombstones and graves – it is as if our history is being washed away in front of our eyes.

Since our last intervention in 2009, The Torres Strait Regional Authority, in partnership with local government, has lobbied the Prime Minister of Australia and Climate Change and Environmental Ministers from both the Australian and Queensland Governments, to discuss the issue as well as invite these decision-makers to come and see for themselves the impact on our communities.

The Torres Strait Regional Authority has also made submissions to a number of Australian and Queensland Government committees investigating the impact of rising sea levels and there has been increased media attention on the recent king tides in January and February this year.

While most of these committees acknowledge that Torres Strait is vulnerable, there has still been limited success in securing the funds needed to develop and implement strategies to address this phenomenon over the immediate to long-term future.

We welcome the Australian and Queensland Governments' undertaking to assist our people to try and address this challenge and we are working to ensure that this is an intergenerational commitment - because there are no short term fixes for climate change.

We have also been able to provide a briefing on climate change and Torres Strait development issues to both the former and current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioners and would like to acknowledge both Tom Calma and Mick Gooda for their assistance in highlighting this issue in the Commission's reports.

We are also thankful to the United Nations' Special Rapporteur, James Anaya for also meeting with the Torres Strait Regional Authority and listening to the issues associated with our struggle.

The Torres Strait Regional Authority has been proactive in the past 12 months, drafting a climate change strategy for our region that we hope will deal with the immediate threats, while preparing our people for longer-term adaptation - but we can only do so much with limited resources.

I wish to refer briefly to Article 32, paragraph 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I believe this Article is relevant to the Torres Strait because of the willing support offered by Torres Strait Islander people living in the region that enables the Australian Government to use our land and seas as a buffer to protect the Australian mainland.

The Torres Strait is a valuable asset to the Australian government in managing its international border with Papua New Guinea and so the wellbeing of our communities must be a priority in their own right.

While we are doing everything within our level of influence and ability to help ourselves and adapt to climate change, it is quite possible in a scenario where we begin to see seasonal events such as flooding and inundation become more regular and intense, that Australia's first climate change refugees may be coming from our region.

This is a reality that nobody in the Torres Strait wants to be realised, but it is a potential scenario that Governments must be held accountable for if it unfolds, especially since we are identifying the trends now and have time to deal with it in a strategic, coordinated and sustained way.

I urge this forum and others like it that are able to engage with national governments to continue to monitor the impact of climate change in the Torres Strait and continue to assist us in creating a long-term whole of government and community solution that will protect and maintain our traditional homeland now and in the future.

Thank you.