

Australia's Pacific island role challenged in climate row

WELLINGTON: Influential Pacific island leaders have called for Australia to be ousted from the region's main regional grouping, criticizing Canberra's "neo-colonial" attitudes and refusal to take urgent action on climate change. It comes after Australia was accused of muzzling leaders who wanted to use last week's Pacific Islands Forum in Tuvalu to issue a global call for action on climate change ahead of UN-sponsored talks in New York next month.

Australia's Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack then added further insult when he dismissed the islanders' concerns and said they could "come here and pick our fruit" to survive. Tuvalu Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga labelled McCormack's comments "abusive and offensive", challenging Australia's right to a place in the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum. "The spirit of the Pacific way is not understood by these guys, I don't think they understand anything about (it)," he told Radio New Zealand. "And if that's the case, what is the point of these guys remaining in the Pacific Island Leaders' Forum? I don't see any merit in that."

Sopoaga's views echoed those of Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, who over the weekend described his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison as "very insulting" and said China offered a more welcoming brand of diplomacy. Australia has a complex relationship with its Pacific island neighbours, who receive about Aus\$1.4 billion (\$950 million) a year in aid from Canberra. Despite the generous handouts, Pacific islanders often bristle at Australian attitudes to a region that officials in Canberra refer to as "our backyard".

'Difficult conversations'

Sopoaga said the Pacific Islands Forum row on climate

change reminded him of regional meetings decades ago, when "colonial masters" set the agenda. "We are still seeing reflections and manifestations of this neo-colonialist approach to what the leaders are talking about," he told RNZ. Canberra, alarmed at Beijing's diplomatic inroads into the region, last year launched a charm offensive labelled "the Pacific Step-up", aimed at bringing the islands closer and forestalling any chance of a Chinese military base in the region.

But the divisions over climate change exposed at the summit have proved deeper than expected, driving a wedge between Australia and the islands. Pacific leaders view global warming as an existential threat to low-lying nations requiring immediate action, including a rapid transition away from coal, to save their homes.

Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison concedes climate change is real but insists it can be managed in a way that does not hurt the economy, including the lucrative coal industry. Former Kiribati president Anote Tong, a long-time climate campaigner, said China now appeared a better partner in the Pacific because Australia's priority appeared to be preserving its coal industry, not helping to stop global warming.

"It's really about the lesser of two evils, I guess, and at the moment Australia is coming up as the worst of the two evils," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "There's got to be a more respectful way of understanding each other. It cannot be dictated by the coal industry in the background." Tong called for Australia to be suspended from the PIF or sanctioned over its climate stance. Morrison acknowledged there had been "difficult conversations" with Pacific leaders but likened them to a family spat, denying



TUVALU: This handout photo taken and released on August 15, 2019 by the Australian Prime Minister's Office shows Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison (3rd R) talking with other leaders at the Pacific Islands Forum in Tuvalu. — AFP

there was any long-term damage to relations. "Just like any family that comes around the table we discuss all these things through... we've always been there. We will always be there," he told reporters over the weekend. — AFP

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PAGE

248 33 199

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