

# “The Storms and Waves Eat Away our Islands” An interview with Basil Peso from Tulele Peisa\*, Carteret Islands

\*Tulele Peisa is an NGO which supports the climate refugees from the Carteret Islands in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. URL: <http://www.tulelepeisa.org>

Marion Struck-Garbe

The era of climate change migration is underway. The world's first evacuation of low-lying islands due to climate change is going to happen from spring 2009 onwards in the Carteret atoll. The “idyllic” Carterets are a tiny and flat Pacific atoll surrounded by nothing but the open ocean, about 200 kilometres northeast off the coast of Bougainville. The six inhabited small islands are no more than 1.2 metres above sea level. With about 2.600 people the Carteret atoll belongs to the now Autonomous Region Bougainville of Papua New Guinea. In 2005 a political decision was reached to resettle the islanders to mainland Bougainville because scientists predict that the islands could submerge as early as 2015. The process of relocation thus should be finished by 2012.

The relocation of people or even whole nations in the Pacific like Kiribati or Tuvalu is not only a political and economic issue - it is also ethical, spiritual and emotional. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 2008 a conference in Hamburg “Atolls of the South Sea - Holms of the North Sea: International Dialogue on Climate Change” aimed to highlight these issues. The organizers - the Northelbian Centre for World Mission, the Pacific Network and others - invited representatives from NGOs, churches and effected communities from Oceania and Germany to discuss the negative impacts of climate change for the people concerned.

Basil Peso from the NGO Tulele Peisa from Bougainville was one of the speakers. I took the chance to ask him a few questions about the recent situation of the threatened islands.

## What are the problems the people of the Carteret Islands are facing?

It started some years ago. People first thought everything was normal. But then it became much more dramatic what is happening to our islands. The sea coming deep into our gardens is uncommon and the sea is coming in very fast. Flooding of our islands is new. Huene, one of the islands, was sliced in two by the sea. More islands are going to split. The sea is washing it off quickly. Experts advised us to build walls and plant mangroves. We have tried both. But this is not going to work; the walls are broken by the rough sea. The land is getting smaller and the population is getting bigger. We have a race with the sea. And we are giving up because there are no resources to save the islands.



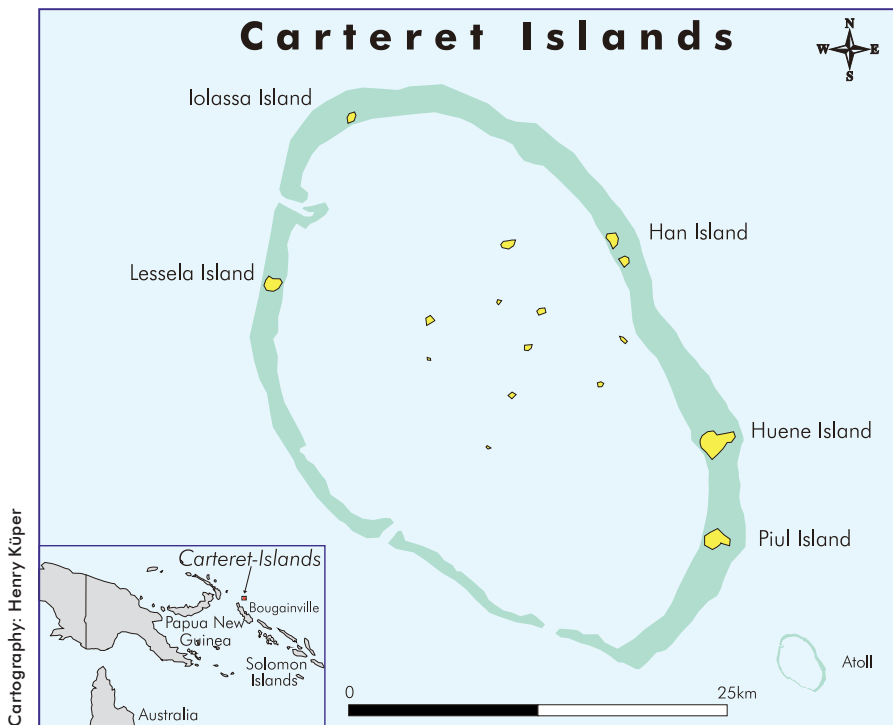
Basil Peso

Source: Marion Struck-Garbe 2008

The main problems the islanders are facing is food and water shortage. Nothing substantial is growing on the Carterets anymore. The soil became salty. Taro and Bananas do not grow in salty ground. We depend on coconut and fish. But the roots of the coconut trees are washing away or get rotten. The destruction is striking. There is not much food available now. There are a few shops getting supplies by banana boat. But they sell their goods for a very high price because it is very costly to go by boat to the mainland. There are no jobs on the islands and only little money. People sell seashells and seacucumber. They

Flooded coconut tree: The stump in the water shows where the shoreline has retreated from.  
Source: NGO Tulele Peisa





collect them only at certain times. They cannot sell the fish. There is no market and it wouldn't come fresh due to the four-hour boat ride and lack of transport (there is no ferry and no airlink to the atoll).

Once every few month the Bougainville administration gives relief supplies. It is only rice. And that's no solution. There is no long term strategy in place.

We are getting more and more water problems now. It is not only the waves destroying our land. Our fresh water is coming from the bottom (underground). But the ocean is washing in the salty waves. Our fresh water gets brackish, spoilt. Some years ago the Carterets had wells. But they don't function any longer. Rainfall is our second source of drinking water. Some villagers have water tanks but our dry season is long. Often water becomes scarce. Often we rely on coconuts for drinking. Coconuts and breadfruits are now our main staples. But saltwater, storms and tidal waves will ruin them too.

### How far has the relocation process proceeded?

The first relocation plan was developed 2005. But the government is slow. In 2007 Tulele Peisa submitted a new plan to the government to speed up the

process and it is now facilitating it. Because of the similarities in language and culture the people of the Carterets will be resettled at Tinputz on northeastern Bougainville. The Catholic Mission is allocating land on two different locations for both agriculture and to build houses. They don't want money for the land. The two chiefs from Tinputz and the Carterets represented their clans in a recent meeting. They exchanged shell money. A customary payment which is valued more by the chiefs because this money represents a promise or an agreement.

In 2008 the building of the houses started. They are built from bush material and they last for 20 years only. This is because there is little money but it is also for cultural reasons. The houses must be similar to those of the others in Tinputz and cannot be permanent houses. The building process is coordinated by the church.

Tulele Peisa does not want anyone to live in a town like Buka as squatters. The islanders should move to a secure place, where they could do their gardening and fishing and make a living. The government wanted to built a different school for the Carteret pupils. But the local villagers don't want this. They say, the Carterets are part of us. It is not a good start to separate them, their kids should

grow together with ours. Japan supports the upgrading of the local school through some assistance. Sister Lorraine - a well known catholic nun - looks into our food security. Together with a youth group she started to grow new plants and she is teaching about sustainable gardening.

Five houses are being built right now. The relocation will start in spring 2009 with five families who face the most inconvenient situation and who are willing to move. All together around 100 people. They will go first. We hope they will be seen as a success and others will want to follow. By 2012 the resettlement of all Carteret Islanders should be finished. That's very little time.

### How do the people feel about the situation?

The sea is threatening the islanders. They feel something has to be done. People worry about a big cyclone or Tsunami which will come along and kill everyone. The men don't have any idea what to do and where to go - unless some people give us land. The women say: We have to find a new place for the younger generation. We need a place to stay with our kids. Women are worried about their children.

The old people do not want to go, they rather drawn with the islands. This confuses the younger generations. They don't feel good to be separated from



Flooded coconut tree: The stump in the water shows where the shoreline has retreated from.

Source: NGO Tulele Peisa

their parents. They don't want to leave them on the islands. But relocation is our only means of building our future. We will lose our identity, but we have no choice. The islands are shrinking.

### What do people talk about the rise of the sea? What do they think about climate change?

They see it is happening, but they don't think about its causes. People don't know much about it. It is happening the last twenty years. The land is disappearing slowly. It happens. The food shortage is happening. Because of our awareness campaign the islanders know by now it is a worldwide thing. It is not only us. It is happening to other islands as well. The people know about Tuvalu. Carteret and Tuvalu are the first ones who drawn. Kiribati and the Marshall Islands will follow. But there is no exchange between the islands because we do not have the money to visit our Pacific neighbours.

### What is the role of Tulele Peisa?

Tulele Peisa ("Sailing the Waves On Our Own") is a locally registered NGO. The aims are firstly to create awareness amongst the Carteret Islanders and overseas. To influence and mobilize people,



Kids with an uncertain future

Source: NGO Tulele Peisa

governments, business and institutions to stop global warming. And secondly to assist the Carteret Islanders during the relocation process. We work on both sides, we support and educate the host communities and the migrants. We organize meetings between the two groups and they travel together around Tinupuz to meet with community leaders to talk about climate change and explain why the Carteret Islanders must relocate from the islands to the mainland.

As the world tries to hammer out a future plan to tackle climate change, tiny islands say it is too late. The rising sea level

and the increase of ferocity of storms is related to global warming caused by greenhouse emissions. Climate policy needs to act internationally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions immediately. Reports by the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) have stated that a rise in sea level of one centimetre can result in beach erosion of one metre. This puts extreme pressure on beaches and densely populated coastal areas. The situation is dire. People are not only becoming refugees but the place they call home will disappear under the rising sea. During the recent conference in Hamburg Reverent Baranite Kirata from Kiribati wrote a sign of conflict and misery on the wall: "If we don't end up in the lagoon, we will end up fighting each other over land, food, water". To avoid this prediction global warming must become an important issue for all governments, industries and communities around the globe. Governments need to be proactive in dealing with the issue. The world needs to pay greater attention to these problems - both ecological and economic.

Interview by Marion Struck-Garbe, Network of Pacific Groups - [www.pazifik-netzwerk.org](http://www.pazifik-netzwerk.org)



Huene a part of Carteret Islands. Huene used to be one island but has now been bisected by rising seas.

Basil Peso [rakovaursula@gmail.com] was born on Bougainville. He attended a vocational training in agriculture in the Solomon Islands. During the civil war on Bougainville he joined the Bougainville Revolutionary Army. Only later he became educated as a social worker during the peace monitoring process. He worked for eight years at the Oxfam rehabilitation and restauration program. When Ursula Rakova - the first local director of the Oxfam program - founded Tulele Peisa to help the people of her home Carteret Islands Basil Peso followed.

Source: Pip Starr, May 2006 (www.starr.tv)