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“As Pacific Leaders and custodians of this vast ocean, we are obliged to preserve the ocean for the sake of future generations and for all living and non-living things. The protection of a sacred ocean is our moral responsibility.”

~ The Pacific Parliamentarians’ Alliance on Deep Sea Mining

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HIGH LEVEL REGIONAL POLITICAL GROUP ON DEEP SEA MINING LAUNCHED

On 14 April 2022 the Pacific Parliamentarians’ Alliance on Deep Sea Mining (PPADSM) was officially launched. as a high-level political voice to advocate for the protection of the Pacific Ocean from exploitation. It is a collective of Pacific leaders who have rallied against the reckless rush by large corporations, backed by powerful governments, to mine the ocean floor for minerals.

The Alliance holds that, given the experimental nature of this industry and growing scientific consensus around the probable irreversible damage to the ocean and ocean systems, all deep sea mining (DSM) activities must cease immediately to allow scientific research to establish whether or not it should be pursued.

Ralph Regenvanu, PPADSM Chair and Vanuatu’s Leader of Opposition said, “Our Ocean defines us. It has sustained us for thousands of years. But today our ocean is facing significant threats due to man-made stressors. DSM is one of these big threats. The science is telling us that the damage from digging and drilling our ocean floors will have devastating and irreversible impacts. It will affect marine life and human lives. We have the opportunity to take action and safeguard our lifeforce.”

The ocean plays a crucial role in mitigating the impacts of climate change by acting as a carbon sink – absorbing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere – thereby helping regulate global climate. It is well established that the health of the ocean is already in decline from human activities such as over-exploitation, pollution, and climate change and global warming. There is no scenario in which DSM does not result in damage; it can only compound these stressors.

The PPADSM also believes that the rush to commence DSM in the region bears a stark resemblance to previous instances where the Pacific Ocean and its peoples were used as test subjects in experimental frontier industries, which ultimately benefitted the rich while leaving the Pacific to bear dire economic, social and environmental consequences.

These complex challenges, the Alliance believes, require strong political leadership and immediate concerted action at the regional level. They are concerned that failing to check this momentum, DSM activities could begin within the next 15 months.

The PPADSM has also released the ‘*Our Ocean Call*’ as part of their launch with five key asks to protect the Pacific Ocean:

a) call for recognition that the ocean is our common heritage and, as Leaders, we have a common responsibility and moral obligation for its protection;

b) call on all Pacific and world leaders to join the growing ranks of governments, scientific authorities, CSOs, global leaders and indigenous peoples the world over opposing the rush to mine the ocean floor;

c) support the call by some Pacific governments for an urgent need to suspend DSM activities in jurisdictions within the Pacific region, to allow for greater scientific understanding about potential impacts of DSM;

d) support the growing international call for a moratorium on DSM in line with the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development to scientifically assess whether DSM can be done in a way that avoids harm to ocean ecosystems, recognizing the interconnectedness of these ecosystems beyond national jurisdictions;

e) urge all states, in accordance with the precautionary principle and in support of evidence-based policy making, to adopt an approach that reviews the scientific evidence, to determine whether or not DSM activities should proceed based on agreed governance structure and regulations that support the inclusion of such measures.

The PPADSM’s membership includes parliamentarians representing Aotearoa New Zealand, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Fiji, Maohi Nui (French Polynesia), Guam, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and Palau.

Sources: www.pacificblueline.org/pacificparliamentarians

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WHAT’S HAPPENING IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

In November 2021 a group of protesters called Malaita for Democracy travelled to Honiara, the nation’s capital. Opposed to the decision by Prime Minister Sogavare’s government in 2019 to switch allegiance to China from Taiwan, the protesters gathered outside parliament and called for Sogavare to address him. When he failed to meet them rioting and unrest broke out and the Honiara’s Chinatown area was destroyed.

In November 2021, Australia sent 100 police and soldiers, and Papua New Guinea sent 50 peacekeepers to help restore peace and security. Australia said it responded to Prime Minister Sogavare’s request to send forces to restore order in Honiara under a bilateral security treaty.

Malaita is the most populous province of the Solomon Islands, and its premier, Daniel Suidani, is opposed to the switch of allegiance from Taiwan to China. China's dominance of fishing, mining and logging in the Solomon Islands is a cause for concern for many Solomon Islanders. In 2019, 90% of all extractive resources went to China, 90% of all timber exports and significantly more seafood than to any other country. China is the Solomon Islands' largest trading partner. When the Solomon Islands switched its allegiance to China in 2019, it also signed up to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the global development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to build infrastructure such as road, ports and telecommunications. The Chinese government describes it as a means to enhance regional connectivity, and says it had the means to raise GDP in developing countries. In Solomon Islands it includes funding for seven facilities for the 2023 Pacific Games in Honiara, including a 10,000-seat national stadium. Critics of BRI say it is saddling countries with unsustainable debt while increasing their dependency on China.

The Solomon Islands are an archipelago of islands and coral atolls. There are six major islands and 992 small islands, atolls and reefs. The population is 520,000. English is the official language, but there are over 80 different local languages and Solomon Islands pijin is the common language.

In March 2022 it was revealed that China and the Solomon Islands had signed a policing agreement, and in April the Solomon Islands and China signed a security agreement. According to Terence Wood, author of the Devpolicy blog, *The Solomons security shambles, and what it says about us*, the agreement, which has not been made public, is likely to be similar to a leaked draft. It says the Solomons can ask China to provide police and military assistance if, and only if, the Solomon Islands government of the day consents. Also, China can "make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishments in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands, and relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands." However, Sogavare is emphatic that there has not been an invitation to China to build a military base. Australia has its own security agreement with Solomon Islands, which affords Australia similar powers to China.

Terence Wood believes that the security agreement is helpful to China because it gives it the ability to protect Chinese nationals and Chinese business interests if riots break out. But he says that a base would not be in China's interests, because it could be removed with a change of government in the Solomon Islands, and any attempt by China to menace Australia from the Solomon Islands would bring about severe trade sanctions on China. For the Solomon Islands it would jeopardise Australian security support and aid.

Although Australia may not be supportive of this new security agreement between Solomon Islands and China, Wood believes it is not a catastrophe. But what is detrimental to relations is Australian politicians twisting the arms of Pacific politicians, talking of invading Pacific Island countries, or referring to the region as Australia's "backyard". The Pacific Island countries are independent nations. Diplomacy is needed, and aid and support focusing on what these countries need. Australia needs to be a respectful and reliable partner.

Sources: [*The Solomons security shambles, and what it says about us*](#) by Terence Wood, 24 April 2022, [*Devpolicy Blog*](#), published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University; 'Explainer: -What is behind unrest in the Solomon Islands' by Kirsty Needham, 30 November 2022, Reuters; 'The \$3bn bargain: how China dominates Pacific mining, logging and fishing by Josh Nicholas', 31 May 2021, *The Guardian*.

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CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE PACIFIC

The current concerns about China's growing power in the Solomon Islands is causing speculation about Australia's relationship with Pacific Island countries. Peter Hooton writes in *Climate Change in the Pacific – what Australia needs to do*:

“Australia has claimed a special relationship with Pacific Island countries as their largest regional trade, investment, security and development partner. But these same countries have been frustrated and disappointed by Australia’s failure to address the issue which poses the gravest single threat to their future viability as sovereign states: climate change.”

Sea level rises are increasing the frequency of king tides and the salinity of fresh water, which could make low-lying Kiribati and Tuvulu uninhabitable in the next 50 years. But Australia’s refusal to reduce its CO2 emissions, and its resistance to international efforts to set emission reduction targets, has led to a lack of respect and trust by Pacific Island countries.

An article by Paul Govind - *COP-26 and the Pacific – Australia’s refusal to embrace a world beyond coal further alienates itself from Pacific/regional neighbours* for the Global Network for Human Rights and the Environment – emphasises that the Pacific Island countries are among the most vulnerable in the world to the effects of climate change, while Australia is one of the principal drivers of increasing global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. For the Pacific Island countries climate change will result in losses relating to life and livelihoods, territorial integrity, culture, and the existence of nationhood, and these nations have stressed the need for urgent action.

Australia is protecting its status as a primary producer of coal, and this has a detrimental effect on the relationship between Australia and the Pacific Islands. At COP26 in November 2021 Pacific Island leaders were focused on reducing Australia’s emissions target. But Australia did not commit to zero emissions by 2030, instead setting 2050 as the date for zero emissions, with most of those reductions likely to occur after 2040. This lack of action to stabilize the global temperature rise shows a disregard for human rights, Paul Govind believes, and as a primary producer and exporter of coal, Australia should recognize its enormous responsibility to mitigate climate change both regionally and internationally.

Samoa's Prime Minister, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, said in an address to the Australia Institute, "We need to push for cutting emissions in half by 2030 to reach carbon neutrality by mid-century."

The Paris Agreement commits nations to limiting global warming to below 2.0 degrees Celsius and, preferably, below 1.5C. But, Fiame said many Pacific nations would not survive the more frequent storms, cyclones, rising sea levels and king tides, that would result from 2.0 degrees of warming.

Pacific Island leaders also called for Australia to re-join the United Nations’ Green Climate Fund which pools and distributes climate funding, but Australia has resisted this, instead continuing with bilateral arrangements, pledging \$500 million for climate finance. Australia also resisted a new fund for Loss and Damage proposed by the Pacific Island nations, because it could be viewed as compensation for historical GHG emissions.

Australia needs to make a genuine commitment to addressing climate change – making cuts to its emissions by 2030 and setting longer term goals for 2050, then work to limit emissions globally, and make a commitment to support mitigation.

Sources: ‘Climate Change in the Pacific – what Australia needs to do’ by Peter Hooton, 24 March 2022, The Interpreter published by The Lowy Institute; ‘COP-26 and the Pacific – Australia’s refusal to embrace a world beyond coal further alienates itself from Pacific/regional neighbours’ by Paul Govind, 12 January 2022, The Global Network for Human Rights and the Environment. ‘Pacific leaders push for halving emissions by 2030 to prevent climate change catastrophe’ by Melissa Carter, 6 October 2021, ABC News.

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