

8 November 2010

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais Wilson, 52 rue des Pâquis, CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland

**Re: Universal Periodic Review of Solomon Islands, 2011
Submission of Earthjustice, Greenpeace International, Human Rights Advocates and
350.org**

I. SUMMARY

1. Recalling the UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251, adopted on 15 March 2006, the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1, adopted on 18 June 2007, and the Decision 6/102, adopted on 27 September 2007, and in accordance with the Information Note for NGOs regarding the Universal Periodic Review mechanism (8 October 2007), Earthjustice et al. respectfully submits to the Human Rights Council the following information regarding threats to human rights in **Solomon Islands** as a result of anthropogenic climate change for its universal review.

2. Via this submission, Earthjustice et al. seek to contribute to the protection of human rights in Solomon Islands, where acute environmental problems related to the extreme vulnerability of this island nation to climate change threaten the realization of a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of all persons. The changes in the physical environment causing these threats have been increasing in frequency and severity over the past several decades and are predicted to increase significantly by the end of the century. This will undermine many human rights recognized under international law.

3. In January 2009, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on climate change and human rights concluding that 1) climate change threatens the enjoyment of a broad array of human rights; 2) human rights obligations provide important protections to individuals who are affected by climate change; and 3) states have legal obligations to those whose rights are affected by climate change, and that those obligations extend extraterritorially. We seek to inform the Human Rights Council of the acute impacts that climate change is having and will have on the human rights of all citizens of Solomon Islands. We urge the Human Rights Council to adopt an outcome recognizing that Solomon Islands cannot be considered as bearing the main responsibility for human rights threats suffered by citizens of Solomon Islands due to climate change. Significantly increased international cooperation will be fundamental to help protect the human rights of the citizens of Solomon Islands. The responsibility for adaptation to and mitigation of climate change in Solomon Islands should be shared by major greenhouse gas emitting states, relative to their share of historic and current emissions.

4. In its Fourth Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that anthropogenic climate change will have significant adverse effects not only on the natural environment, but also on the human populations that inhabit that environment and rely on its processes and services. In Solomon Islands, climate change will:

- Threaten rights to **food, health, means of subsistence**, and the **ability to maintain an adequate standard of living** by causing salinification of limited freshwater sources, worsened cyclones, sea level rise resulting in flooding and overwash during tide surges, and erosion of coastlines and low-lying areas;
- Jeopardize rights to **food, health**, and **subsistence livelihoods** by damaging fisheries through sea level rise, increased sea temperature, and exacerbated cyclones; and
- Endanger rights to **life, property, housing, self-determination, security of person, access to water, sanitation**, and a **healthy environment** due to increased cyclones, droughts, flooding, and spread of disease vectors with warmer air and water temperatures.

5. Increasing changes in the physical environment causing these threats will result in the direct threat to many of the human rights guaranteed by Solomon Islands under international law, including: the right to **life**, the right to **security of person**, the right to **water**; the right to **food**, the right to **means of subsistence**, the right to **sanitation**; the right to **health**, the right to **property**, the right to **housing**, the right to **self-determination**, the right to an **adequate standard of living**, and the right to a **healthy environment**.

II. BACKGROUND

6. Solomon Islands is an island nation in the South Pacific Ocean, east of Papua New Guinea. It consists of hundreds of islands with more than 28,000 km² of land area, comprised of mostly rugged mountains with low-lying coral atolls. Agriculture and fisheries are key economic sectors, both of which can be significantly impacted by climate perturbations. Solomon Islands has a population of 596,000 and a per capita GDP of \$2500.

7. Solomon Islands is party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Human rights referred to in this document that are not based on those conventions find their source in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

III. THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

8. In September 2004, the Government of Solomon Islands submitted its Initial National Communication (SI INC) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The SI INC describes the vulnerability of citizens of Solomon Islands to the effects of climate change:

As a small-island developing nation, the Solomon Islands are extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change....[T]he potential threat posed by climate change and accelerated sea-level rise to those living in small island states is well documented. Being a global issue it is also well known that only concerted international effort will reduce the threat posed by climate change....[G]iven the complexity and diversity of Solomon Islands it is evident that there will be vulnerable islands, vulnerable areas on islands, vulnerable ecosystems, and vulnerable people.

9. **Agriculture** in Solomon Islands consists of a rural mixed-subsistence sector and a commercial sector. Subsistence agriculture is Solomon Islands' dominant economic activity, based on cassava and sweet potato. Commercial agriculture is export-driven and based on palm oil products, copra (dried coconut), coconut oil, and cocoa. Agriculture employs 75% of the workforce and accounts for 42% of GDP. In the context of vulnerability to climate and sea-level change, Solomon Islands identified agriculture as one of the systems of greatest importance throughout the country. Extreme climatic conditions like droughts, flooding, and cyclones bear significant impacts on the agricultural sector. These events have

already damaged subsistence food crops to such an extent that *any* future increase in frequency or intensity of extremes could lead to production loss. Indeed, it took ten years for palm oil production to recover from the effects of cyclone Namu in 1986. Drier conditions resulting from climate change would also increase loss of production of important crops such as taro and kumara. Already, taro production has declined in some recent years in the coastal lowland of Makira due to wave overtopping and drier conditions. Salt-water intrusion and flooding in low-lying coastal areas further jeopardizes yields. Sea-level rise and erosion can also destroy quantity and quality of land, with considerable adverse impacts on agriculture. Loss in production due to climate change could have serious effects on the economy, health and well-being of the people.

Climate change threatens Solomon Islanders' rights to food, to a means of subsistence, and to an adequate standard of living.

10. **Fisheries** are a key sector of Solomon Islands' economy, comprised of subsistence and predominantly tuna-based industrial, fishing. Subsistence fishing is concentrated in coastal and nearshore reefs and lagoons and consists of reef fish, crustaceans, and other in-shore fisheries resources, harvested for personal consumption and for sale in local markets. With more than half of Solomon Islands' population living on the coast, in-shore fish resources are an important source of livelihood for Solomon Islanders. Annual per capita consumption is estimated at 32-40 kg nationwide.

Fisheries in the Pacific are predicted to be harmed by the effects of climate change, including sea temperature rise, increasing acidity, changing currents, and cyclone damage. Among the most vulnerable ecosystems to climate and sea-level change in Solomon Islands are coral reefs, mangroves, and other marine ecosystems—all of which are key habitats for fish populations. Sea surface temperature variations affect the distribution of tuna stocks, as evidenced by reduced tuna catches resulting from changes in sea surface temperature and ocean currents associated with the 1997/98 El Niño. Changes to average sea surface temperatures in the future could result in a higher frequency of diminished catches. As fish become harder to catch, citizens will have a reduced amount of fish (and thus protein essential for good nutrition) in their diets, or will have to turn to more expensive substitutes.

Decline of coral communities will reduce the richness of fish species and will result in local extinctions and loss of species within key functional groups of fish. Rising sea surface temperatures trigger corals to eject their symbiotic algae in response to stress, resulting in coral bleaching, mass mortality of reefs, and loss of storm protection to coastlines and mangroves. Since early 2010, one of the worst mass coral bleaching events on record is threatening the health of the Coral Triangle, a vast marine region that includes Solomon Islands and is home to 76 percent of all known corals in the world. **Climate change threatens reef and pelagic fish, as well as mangroves and corals, – both of which are key habitat for fish populations – threatening Solomon Islanders' rights to food, right to a means of subsistence, right to an adequate standard of living, and right to a healthy environment.**

11. Rainfall is generally abundant in Solomon Islands, except during El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) events. The 1997-98 event caused severe water shortages in most parts of the country. Groundwater is also at risk from sea level rise, flooding and storm surges. According to the SI INC:

Groundwater resources of the lowlands of high islands and atolls may be affected by flooding and inundation from sea level rise. Water catchments of smaller, low lying islands will be at high risk from any changes in frequency of extreme events. Likewise, any increases in frequency and intensity of extreme events will affect the quantity and quality of water throughout Solomon Islands.

Climate change threatens Solomon Islanders' rights to water, health, and sanitation.

12. In Solomon Islands, **surface air temperatures** are increasing. Trends in extreme temperature across the South Pacific from 1961 to 2003 show increases in the annual number of hot days and warm nights, particularly following ENSO events. Increased heat events around the world are linked to increased cardiovascular mortality, respiratory illnesses, malnutrition from crop failures, and altered transmission of infectious diseases. According to the SI INC:

Human health will be affected by climate change and extreme events. Increased frequency of cyclones and flooding will have an impact on public health including loss of life, injury and outbreaks of cholera and other diarrhoeal diseases. Malaria may increase in the future and spread to the mountain areas of the major islands. Higher temperatures may also favour increased incidence of the more dangerous falciparum malaria in mountain areas.

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[T]emperature influences the rate of parasite multiplication in carrier mosquitoes as well as mosquito biting rates. Thus, overall temperature strongly influences epidemic potential.

Climate change threatens Solomon Islanders' rights to health and a healthy environment.

13. High surface water temperatures intensify the destructive force of **cyclones**. These storms threaten the lives of Solomon Islanders between December and March and cause massive damage to agriculture, infrastructure, coral reefs, forests, and freshwater sources. According to the SI INC:

Solomon Islands is already vulnerable to extreme climatic events such as flooding associated with heavy rainfall and tropical cyclones These events have increased in frequency, intensity and duration, and may be exacerbated in the future by climate and sea-level change.

Climate change threatens rights of Solomon Islanders to life, housing, property, and security of person.

14. **Rising sea levels** pose a serious threat to Solomon Islanders, as 85% of the population live in small and widely dispersed rural settlements, mostly along the coastal areas. The IPCC predicts that sea levels will rise by as much as 0.59 meters before the end of the century if global fossil fuel use is not significantly reduced. This will exacerbate inundation, storm surges, erosion and other coastal hazards, threatening vital infrastructure and facilities that support island communities. As explained in the SI INC:

Coastal environments and systems are at risk from sea level rise and warmer sea temperatures. Areas most vulnerable to flooding and inundation as a result of sea level rise, with the combined effects of seasonal storms, high tides and storm surges associated with tropical cyclones, are the populated coastal lowlands and low-lying islands and atolls. Coastal erosion is already evident in many parts of the country.

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Areas of highest risk in Solomon Islands are the low-lying islands and atolls including Reef Islands, Ongtong Java and Sikaiana. Sea level rise alone, with no change in climate variability, would increase the risk of flooding and inundation. It is possible that in the extreme case these islands will become uninhabitable.

Climate change threatens Solomon Islanders' rights to security of person, property, housing, culture, traditional knowledge, and self-determination.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

15. One of the most serious threats to the human rights of the people of Solomon Islands is the vulnerability of their environment to the impacts of climate change. The threats confronting Solomon Islands illustrate how the right to an ecologically healthy environment is fundamental to guaranteeing other rights, such as the rights to life, food, water, health, security, and a means of subsistence.

16. The primary responsibility for the protection of human rights for the citizens of Solomon Islands lies in the hands of the state. However, responsibility for the causes of climate change and its impacts on the human rights of Solomon Islanders also lies with states that are major emitters of greenhouse gases. Solomon Islands is not a significant consumer of the fossil fuels that are the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions, and it is among those nations that emit the smallest amounts of greenhouse gases in the world. The international community – and particularly those nations historically and currently responsible for the greatest portion of greenhouse gas emissions – has a responsibility to prevent climate change from undermining the human rights of citizens of Solomon Islands and, where particular circumstances makes that not possible, to mitigate the harms and assist the victims.

17. Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscores that protection of human rights requires “national effort and international co-operation.” Every state has the obligation to do no harm either to its own citizens or to the citizens of another state. Earthjustice et al. therefore respectfully recommends that the Human Rights Council 1) recognize the responsibility of major greenhouse gas-emitting states for the human rights threats suffered by the people of Solomon Islands, and 2) encourage the international community to take immediate action to decrease global greenhouse gas emissions and to assist the government of Solomon Islands in its efforts to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change.

Respectfully Submitted,

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NOTE: A fully referenced, footnoted version of this submission is available at <http://www.earthjustice.org/humanrights>