GOVERNMENTS DON'T HAVE CONSCIENCE; ONLY FOUR-YEAR ELECTION TERMS....

THREE UNUSUAL CORAL ISLANDS that make up Kiribati occupy a small area in the Pacific. Kiribati is one of the low-lying island states where the highest land is no more than two metres above sea level, making it highly vulnerable to rising sea levels and global warming. Kiribati President Anote Tong has over the past several years frequently lent his voice to calls for action on climate change. In New Delhi to participate in the 13th Delhi Sustainable Development Summit, he spoke to The Hindu's Soumya Ashok on how nations could mean his country comes together again.

How do the people of Kiribati perceive the threat of rising sea levels given several years of peaceful co-existence with the sea? The threat is very real. Everybody sees the sea mounting on the shores and during high tides it is getting higher. Once in a while, the water floods our homes and we start to get worried. And then at such moments when you see that sea levels are rising further, you know that we won't be able to handle those extreme high tides. India too may experience such strong waves but the difference is you have a mountain behind you while we just have a coconut tree.

What are the most visible impacts of climate change in Kiribati? When were these changes noticed? If I had to provide one example, it would be that of a village community that had to be relocated due to rising sea levels. This was 10 years ago. We tried to build protected sea walls, but it really did not do the job. Many communities are suffering because seawater contaminates freshwater ponds that are used to develop food crops. This is happening on a number of islands and in a number of places. Erosion has also been a problem and I believe it has been happening over time but not to the extent that it has been happening at the moment.

How does Kiribati fund the construction of sea walls and other kinds of reinforcements to make the nation climate change proof? At the moment, we are building sea walls simply to protect public infrastructure. There is a lot more damage we are not dealing with because we do not have the resources to do so. We do get some assistance from our development partners in a small way. This is all to deal with the problem of climate change. It is quite a different issue on how to deal with the problem in the longer term to make our island climate change proof.

Several options are being considered to secure the future of the people such as buying land in Fiji, relocating some part of the population to East Timor or mass-made islands to reclaim land by filling it with dirt. Are you seriously considering any of these options? Ideally, I would like to be able to build the island to make it climate change proof, but given the current attitude of the international community, I feel that our resources required are more than anything else. We have been going to conferences and at some point in time we just can't have enough land to live on. So we have to look at other options. I think this is only realistic in a mother country we understand.

But also think it is a mistake to think that these options are ultimately exclusive. We will build up some of the islands as it is important to maintain the nation of Kiribati. Our approach is to begin the process of relocation. We are not going to tell our people to relocate but we will give them the option and will build their homes so they don't have to live as second-class citizens wherever they are.

Is there a misconception among countries that if you are economically strong and geographically secure you are free from the clutches of climate change? What has been Kiribati's experience in dealing with Western countries? I will invite you to refer to some of my very early statements when I spoke with a lot of anger and I think that was very much reflected in my statements. I also spoke with a sense of fatality because we really do not have much to choose from.

As I said at the summit, no matter what happens in these negotiations, we will be affected very significantly. I keep trying to appeal to the conscience of people but unfortunately governments do not have a conscience. They only have four-year election terms. I had meetings with different countries who have been very complimentary.

The recurring theme in the summit has been that of a "lack of political will," but recently United States President Barack Obama spoke about climate change in his inaugural address. Do you think this will have a dramatic impact on what happens next? There has been a very noticeable change in attitude among governments and individials over the years. Previously, people would reject or simply try to oppose it but now they are beginning to understand the risk. Mr. Obama's statement is very significant for climate change and he has always been sympathetic to the challenges of climate change. I hope this will change things but I hope it does not take too long for we are running out of time.

What kind of relationship do you see with India on this issue? India is doing what we would like to do in the field of technology in renewable energy, especially extending it to rural areas. This is something we are interested in taking forward.

What is the message or outcome you are taking back to the people of your nation after summit? My people are not interested in greenhouse gas emissions, whether the particular nation in 500 parts per million at 400 ppm or whether the temperature has increased by two degrees Celsius or three degrees Celsius. What they are interested in knowing is how are we going to build the resources in make us feel a bit safer? So in answer to your question whether I will be able to go back with the assurance that the resources are on their way, I have to say, no; I don't think so.