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Reuters News Service, 'Tiny Tuvalu sues United States over rising sea level'

29.08.2002

JOHANNESBURG – The United States faces new challenges in the courts over its climate policies despite denying that the world's biggest polluter is responsible for global warming.

The government of the tiny Pacific island state of Tuvalu today said it planned to launch lawsuits within a year against the United States and Australia. Both have rejected the Kyoto protocol on climate change.

Tuvalu, which is only four metres above sea level at its highest point, faces oblivion if the scientists' gloomy scenarios prove right and global warming causes the sea to rise. Tuvalu blames the rising sea level on global warming, caused by polluters.

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Although the legal threats are small scale, environmentalists say they could be a taste of things to come as victims of rising sea levels and increased droughts and floods go after those they see as responsible – the main polluters.

'Until the United States takes significant action, it is vulnerable to this type of lawsuit,' said Jennifer Morgan of WWF, formerly the World Wildlife Fund, on the sidelines of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Washington pulled out of the Kyoto protocol on climate change last year, saying its requirement for developed countries to reduce emissions from sectors like industry, transport and agriculture would hurt its economy.

Despite a voluntary programme to reduce 'energy intensity', and a raft of local initiatives, US emissions continue to rise.

A report released today by US advocacy group the National Environment Trust showed the United States' 288 million population emit the same amount of greenhouse gases as 2.6 billion people living in 151 developing countries.

Looking at emissions state by state, the study found the worst polluter was President George Bush's home state of Texas whose oil-rich 22 million people are responsible for emissions equivalent to those of one billion of the world's poor.

Although lawsuits from the likes of Tuvalu and Boulder, Colorado, are unlikely to give US leaders sleepless nights, they will add to the political

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pressure on the Bush administration which has come under fire at the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Bush has declined to join more than 100 world leaders for the finale of the summit, marking 10 years since the first Earth Summit in Rio which spawned global efforts to tackle climate change.

(Reuters News Service, 2002a)
