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U.N. Deadlock on Addressing Climate Shift

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

UNITED NATIONS — The persistent inability of the United Nations to forge international consensus on [climate change](#) issues was on display Wednesday, as Security Council members disagreed over whether they should address possible instability provoked by problems like rising sea levels or competition over water resources.

Western powers like the United States argued that the potential effects of climate change, including the mass migrations of populations, made it a crucial issue in terms of global peace and security. Russia and China, backed by much of the developing world, rejected the notion that the issue even belonged on the Security Council agenda.

With the major powers again at loggerheads, President Marcus Stephen of Nauru traveled the nearly 8,000 miles from his tiny Pacific island state to plead for action.

Speaking on behalf of some 14 [island states vulnerable to disappearing](#) or at least losing significant territory to rising sea levels, Mr. Stephen mused aloud about how the debate might differ if larger countries were affected.

“What if the pollution coming from our island nations was threatening the very existence of the major emitters?” he said. “What would be the nature of today’s debate under those circumstances?”

Countries threatened with extinction — already some residents have experimented with emigrating as higher and higher tides endanger their livelihoods — are tired of merely hearing sympathy for their plight, the president said.

“Demonstrate it by formally recognizing that climate change is a threat to international peace and security,” Mr. Stephen said, comparing it to nuclear proliferation or terrorism given its potential to destabilize governments and create conflict. “Neither has ever led to the disappearance of an entire nation, though that is what we are confronted with today.”

Achim Steiner, the head of the United Nations Environment Program, noted that 145 countries rely on water from rivers that cross borders, with tension escalating among states over control of them as demand starts to outstrip supply.

Despite such pleas, the debate, organized by Germany as this month’s council president, broke down along the same basic fault lines as the first such discussion four years ago. Much of the argument was about bureaucratic prerogatives. (President Stephen of Nauru said he wished council members were more concerned about encroaching water than encroachments on bureaucratic turf.)

Both Russia and China stressed that other United Nations bodies were the proper places for discussion, in particular the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#), because it includes all member states. The bloc of some 120 developing nations endorsed this position, echoed in the speeches of Brazil, India and South Africa, among others. Some said concerns about climate change were based on speculation rather than science.

“Climate change may affect security but it is fundamentally a sustainable development issue,” said Wang Min, the deputy permanent representative from China, repeating a longstanding Chinese position that the developed world should devote more aid to helping those affected. “The Security Council does not have the expertise in climate change and does not have the necessary means and resources.”

The American ambassador, Susan E. Rice, lashed out at other members for not addressing the problem. “This is more than disappointing,” she said. “It’s pathetic.”

Outside organizations that track climate change negotiations said that despite the lack of consensus, any high profile attention paid to the issue was helpful.

They also noted a certain irony that countries arguing against Security Council action, like Russia and China, were actually taking real steps toward mitigating climate change at home, whereas the United States — for all its rhetoric at the United Nations — lacked a national program.

“There is an interesting contrast between countries not being willing to move on climate change in this venue and what they are doing on the ground,” said Keya Chatterjee, the director of international climate policy at the [World Wildlife Fund](#).