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Rising Credulity

By Nils-Axel Mörner

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It has now become traditional for climate change summits to open with a new, dazzling prediction of impending catastrophe. The UN Climate Conference under way in the South African coastal town of Durban is no exception. This year's focus is on a familiar and certainly arresting argument: that sea levels are rising at a catastrophic and unprecedented rate mainly due to man-made global warming.

No one makes this point with quite so much panache as Mohamed Nasheed, president of the Maldives. In the run-up to the summit, he declared that he leads 'an island nation that may slip beneath the waves if all this talk on climate does not lead to action soon'.

Since chairing a meeting of his Cabinet underwater, Nasheed has been busy rallying other low-lying countries to make similar points. He chaired a summit of them in Bangladesh, to compare notes ahead of the Durban summit, and they agree to limit their own carbon emissions. Ban Ki-moon, the head of the United Nations, was delighted — saying that it was unfair to ask 'the poorest and most vulnerable to bear the brunt of the impact of climate change alone' and called for them to be given subsidies by richer countries to adapt. Such funds do not seem to be forthcoming. It seems the summit in Durban will, like so many climate summits, be disappointing.

I may be able to help. As someone with some expertise in the field, I can assure the low-lying countries that this is a false alarm. The sea is not rising precipitously. I have studied many of the low-lying regions in my 45-year career recording and interpreting sea level data. I have conducted six field trips to the Maldives; I have been to Bangladesh, whose environment minister was claiming that flooding due to climate change threatened to create in her country 20 million 'ecological refugees'. I have carefully examined the data of 'drowning' Tuvalu. And I can report that, while such regions do have problems, they need not fear rising sea levels.

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