



1 A rising problem

WITH 80 per cent of its land less than 1m above sea level, climate change poses potentially devastating consequences for the low-lying group of atolls making up the Maldives in the Indian Ocean.

The highest point in its 298sq km area, which is south-west of Sri Lanka, is 2.8m on Wilingili island in the Addu Atoll.

The Maldives, a famous holiday destination which was first to sign the Kyoto Protocol, is made up of small islands grouped into 26 natural atolls and is reputedly the flattest country in the world.

The sea in the vicinity of the nation has been rising at a rate of 1mm each year for the 10 years from 1996 as shown by tide gauge readings from designated locations, the Department of Meteorology deputy director general Abdullah Algeen has said.

In a speech in July, President Gayoom said climate change, sea-level rise and their related effects are a reality encountered right now in the daily lives of the Maldivian people and that the people need a solution urgently.

Flinders University's School of Biological Sciences head Associate Professor Jim Mitchell says that with only four of the 12,000 islands bigger than one square kilometre, the Maldives would lose a significant amount of land with rising sea levels.

Apart from sea level rise, the CIA World Factbook 2007 says the Maldives' environment issues include depletion of freshwater aquifers threatening water supplies and coral reef bleaching. The impact of erosion also is a concern for Maldivian authorities.

In June, the Maldives' Haveeru News Service reported that a house was almost falling into the sea in Haa Alifu atoll on Dhiddhoo island. Five years ago, the home was 122m inland.

Among the events to bring environmental realities home to the Maldivians were the tidal waves in 1987 and 2004.

The major tsunami in late December, 2004, left more than 100 dead, 12,000 displaced and property damage exceeding \$300 million.

The capital Male, which is home to about 100,000 of the nation's 370,000 people, benefited from a \$62 million project by Japan of erecting a seawall around the island.

Minister of Environment, Energy and Water Ahmed Abdullah says the unusual tidal swells that hit several islands in the Maldives for three days in May are a reminder of the warnings how vulnerable the Maldives is to climate change.