

**EARTHJUSTICE  
GREENPEACE INTERNATIONAL  
HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES  
350.ORG**

8 November 2010

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights  
Palais Wilson, 52 rue des Pâquis, CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland

**Re: Universal Periodic Review of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, 2011  
Submission of Earthjustice, Greenpeace International, Human Rights Advocates and  
350.org**

**I. SUMMARY**

1. Recalling the UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251, adopted on 15 March 2006, the UN Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1, adopted on 18 June 2007, and the Decision 6/102, adopted on 27 September 2007, and in accordance with the Information Note for NGOs regarding the Universal Periodic Review mechanism (8 October 2007), Earthjustice et al. respectfully submits to the Human Rights Council the following information regarding threats to human rights in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (hereinafter St. Vincent) as a result of anthropogenic climate change for its universal review.
2. Via this submission, Earthjustice et al. seek to contribute to the protection of human rights in St. Vincent, where acute environmental problems related to the extreme vulnerability of this island nation to climate change threaten the realization of a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of all persons. The changes in the physical environment causing these threats have been increasing in frequency and severity over the past several decades and are predicted to increase significantly by the end of the century. This will undermine many human rights recognized under international law.
3. In January 2009, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on climate change and human rights concluding that 1) climate change threatens the enjoyment of a broad array of human rights; 2) human rights obligations provide important protections to individuals who are affected by climate change; and 3) states have legal obligations to those whose rights are affected by climate change, and that those obligations extend extraterritorially. We seek to inform the Human Rights Council of the acute impacts that climate change is having and will have on the human rights of all citizens of St. Vincent. We urge the Human Rights Council to adopt an outcome recognizing that St. Vincent cannot be considered as bearing the main responsibility for human rights threats suffered by citizens of St. Vincent due to climate change. Significantly increased international cooperation will be fundamental to help protect the human rights of the citizens of St. Vincent. The responsibility for adaptation to and mitigation of climate change in St. Vincent should be shared by major greenhouse gas emitting states, relative to their share of historic and current emissions.
4. In its Fourth Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that anthropogenic climate change will have significant adverse effects not only on the natural environment, but also on the human populations that inhabit that environment and rely on its processes and services. In St. Vincent, climate change will:

- Threaten rights to **food, health, means of subsistence**, and the **ability to maintain an adequate standard of living** by causing salinification of limited freshwater sources, intensified tropical storms and hurricanes, sea-level rise resulting in flooding and overwash during tide surges, and erosion of coastlines and low-lying areas;
- Jeopardize rights to **food, health, and subsistence livelihoods** by damaging fisheries through sea-level rise, increased sea temperature, and exacerbated tropical storms and hurricanes; and
- Endanger rights to **life, property, housing, self-determination, security of person, access to water, sanitation**, and a **healthy environment** due to increased tropical storms and hurricanes, droughts, flooding, and spread of disease vectors with warmer air and water temperatures.

5. Increasing changes in the physical environment causing these threats will result in the direct threat to many of the human rights guaranteed by St. Vincent under international law, including: the right to **life**, the right to **security of person**, the right to **water**; the right to **food**, the right to **means of subsistence**, the right to **sanitation**, the right to **health**, the right to **property**, the right to **housing**, the right to **self-determination**, the right to an **adequate standard of living**, and the right to a **healthy environment**.

## **II. BACKGROUND**

6. Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is comprised of over 30 islands, inlets, and cays between the Caribbean Sea and North Atlantic Ocean, and is part of the Windward Island chain of the Lesser Antilles. Its 345 km<sup>2</sup> of land area, 84 km of which is coastline, includes the rugged, mountainous mainland island of St. Vincent, and the much smaller, low-lying Grenadines, whose near-shore coral-reef formations and deposition have influenced their white sandy beaches. With a population of 105,000, St. Vincent's per capita GDP was \$10,200 in 2009. Agriculture and tourism, both highly seasonal, are key sectors of the economy and account for the bulk of the nation's employment.

7. St. Vincent is party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Human rights referred to in this document that are not based on that convention find their source in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## **III. THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN ST. VINCENT**

8. In November 2000, the Government submitted its Initial National Communication (SVG NC) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The SVG NC highlighted the high vulnerability of the citizens of St Vincent to the effects of climate change, especially accelerated sea-level rise, noting that 85 percent of the population, 80 percent of the infrastructure base, and 90 percent of the country's economic investment is situated on a narrow coastal strip less than five meters above sea level and less than five km from the high-water mark. St. Vincent is already experiencing disruptive changes due to climate change, including sea-level rise, tropical storms, inland flooding, landslides, and precipitation variability.

9. **Agriculture** in St. Vincent consists primarily of bananas, mangos, coconuts, citrus fruit, and root crops such as arrowroot, dasheen, eddoes, yams, and sweet potatoes. Bananas are the nation's most important agricultural commodity, employing more than 60 percent of the work force and comprising half of merchandise exports. St. Vincent is the world's largest producer of arrowroot.

Despite the scarcity of prime agricultural land, St. Vincent's economy is heavily dependent on agriculture. The demand for agricultural land has led to encroachment onto steep slopes at higher elevations, which is contributing to landslides and increased sediment transport. As noted in the SVG NC:

For agriculture, accelerated global warming will affect CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations, temperature, solar radiation, and precipitation patterns. Particularly important will be precipitation patterns that could change relatively wet areas to dry areas, with substantial impacts on agriculture. Given the importance of agriculture to the country's economic base, further work is warranted to assess climate-change-related impacts in agriculture and to identify appropriate adaptation measures.

Minor shifts in rainfall patterns could turn relatively wet islands into dry ones, with devastating impacts on agricultural productivity, particularly given the low use of irrigation in the region. Reduced rainfall could affect root crops, which are important domestically and for export. **Climate change threatens Vincentian's rights to food, means of subsistence, and adequate standard of living.**

10. **Fisheries** in St. Vincent consist of oceanic and inshore pelagic species. The fishing industry in St. Vincent is predominantly small scale and artisanal. Fishing is the second major source of employment in the Grenadines and is important as a source of livelihood in St. Vincent as well. Fisheries in the Caribbean are predicted to be harmed by the effects of climate change, including sea temperature rise, increasing acidity and salinity, changing currents, and damage from tropical storms and hurricanes. As St. Vincent notes in the SVG NC:

Fisheries resources face serious threats from climate-change-associated impacts. Sea-level rise and increased ocean temperatures coupled with marine pollution will have substantial impact on the coral-reef system, mangroves, and seagrass beds, which are the major nurseries of the fishing industry.

Sea temperature increases reduce oxygen content and enable toxic algae and harmful bacteria to grow; these conditions can destroy several species of fish, as evidenced already in coastal waters in the southeastern Caribbean. In addition, inundation of shallow reefs and mangroves will result in loss of breeding grounds, which will eventually lead to the loss of some species. Decline in coral communities will reduce the richness of fish species and will result in local extinctions and loss of species within key functional groups of fish.

St. Vincent has an abundance of coral species. Rising sea surface temperatures trigger corals to eject their symbiotic algae in response to stress, resulting in coral bleaching, mass mortality of reefs, and loss of storm protection to coastlines and mangroves. In 2005 a massive bleaching event occurred in the Caribbean, coinciding with abnormally high sea temperatures in those waters. **Climate change threatens pelagic fisheries, along with reefs, mangroves and corals—all of which are key habitat for fish populations—threatening Vincentians' rights to food, right to a means of subsistence, right to an adequate standard of living, and right to a healthy environment.**

11. **Tourism**, one of St. Vincent's most important industries, is threatened by climate changes that worsen droughts and tropical storms, erode beaches, damage coastal infrastructure, and bleach corals. Tourism is the chief earner of foreign exchange for the nation, which has become increasingly popular with luxury travelers. More intensive tourism development is

affecting water quality and placing stress on nearshore coral reefs in both the Grenadines and St. Vincent. Yet the nation's white sandy beaches, which are influenced by coral-reef deposition, as well as corals themselves, are much of what appeals to tourists. Visitor arrivals in 2009 exceeded 270,000—almost three times the national population. Ecotourism and diving are among the most popular tourist activities in St. Vincent. **As climate change threatens Vincentian tourism, it undermines Vincentians' rights to an adequate standard of living.**

12. St. Vincent faces **severe water shortages**, particularly during El Niño Southern Oscillation events. Climate models predict a decrease in rainfall in the near future due to an enhanced greenhouse effect. In the Grenadines, rainwater runoff is the primary source of fresh water; severe shortages due to the limited supply of surface or groundwater are already occurring. Climate modeling of current and future water resource availability on several Caribbean small islands indicates that many of these islands will be exposed to severe water stress. In a nation where freshwater is limited and faces competition from population growth, agriculture, tourism, industry, and electric power generation, the prospect of reduced rainfall may well result in an inability to meet water demand during those dry periods. **Climate change threatens Vincentians' rights to water, health, and sanitation.**

13. Trends in **extreme temperature** across the Caribbean since the 1950s have shown considerable increases in the percentage of days having very warm maximum or minimum temperatures and a decrease in the percentage of days with cold temperatures. Increased heat events around the world are linked to increased cardiovascular mortality, respiratory illnesses, malnutrition from crop failures, and altered transmission of infectious diseases. **Climate change threatens Vincentian citizens' rights to health and a healthy environment.**

14. High surface water temperatures intensify the destructive force of **tropical storms and hurricanes**. St. Vincent is situated in the path of Atlantic-based tropical storms and hurricanes. These storms threaten the lives of Vincentians during the rainy season from May to November each year. Hurricanes, tropical storms, and their resulting storm surges have damaged large expanses of coastline and washed away homes, forcing relocation. Several hurricanes that did not directly hit St. Vincent nonetheless caused hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage due to their storm surge. Rising sea levels raise the baseline for storm surges, increasing the risk of catastrophic loss of life and infrastructure onshore. **Climate change threatens rights of Vincentian citizens to life, housing, property, and security of person.**

15. **Rising sea levels** pose a serious threat to the majority of Vincentians—both on St. Vincent, where 90 percent of the permanent population resides, and in the Grenadines, where tourism provides the main source of economic support. The nation relies on its offshore reefs and coral-based, sandy beaches, and the bulk of the population and resorts are located on the shoreline with limited ability to move inland. St. Vincent's coastal resources, including fisheries, coral reefs, sand, mangroves and near-shore vegetation, are extremely vulnerable to sea-level rise. The IPCC predicts that sea levels will rise an additional 0.23 to 0.47 meters before the end of the century if global fossil fuel use is not significantly reduced. This will exacerbate inundation, storm surges, erosion and other coastal hazards, threatening vital infrastructure and facilities that support island communities. Sea-level rise will push salt water inland along low-lying river valleys, affecting agricultural activities and displacing the communities dependent on them. Loss of lands due to sea-level rise could force thousands of Vincentian citizens to become climate migrants and to move to other countries. **Climate change threatens Vincentians' rights to security of person, property, housing, and self-determination.**

#### **IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

16. One of the most serious threats to the human rights of the people of St. Vincent is the vulnerability of their environment to the impacts of climate change. The threats confronting St. Vincent illustrate how the right to an ecologically healthy environment is fundamental to guaranteeing other rights, such as the rights to life, food, water, health, security, and a means of subsistence.

17. The primary responsibility for the protection of human rights for the citizens of St. Vincent lies in the hands of the state. However, responsibility for the causes and impacts of climate change on the human rights of Vincentian citizens also lies with states that are major emitters of greenhouse gases. St. Vincent is not a significant consumer of the fossil fuels that are the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions, and it is among those nations that emit the smallest amounts of greenhouse gases in the world. St. Vincent is actively involved in international climate protection negotiations and is working to implement adaptations to climate change. The international community – and particularly those nations historically and currently responsible for the greatest portion of greenhouse gas emissions – has a responsibility to prevent climate change from undermining the human rights of citizens of St. Vincent and, where particular circumstances makes that not possible, to mitigate the harms and assist the victims.

18. Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscores that protection of human rights requires “national effort and international co-operation.” Every state has the obligation to do no harm either to its own citizens or to the citizens of another state. Earthjustice et al. therefore respectfully recommends that the Human Rights Council 1) recognize the responsibility of major greenhouse gas-emitting states for the human rights threats suffered by the people of St. Vincent, and 2) encourage the international community to take immediate action to decrease global greenhouse gas emissions and to assist the government of St. Vincent in its efforts to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change.

Respectfully Submitted,

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**NOTE: A fully referenced, footnoted version of this submission is available at <http://www.earthjustice.org/humanrights>**