

Coast Guard Delivers Water to Drought-Stricken Kiribati at Critical Juncture



The Coast Guard Cutter Oliver Berry crew conducts a potable water offload while moored up at Kiritimati Island, Kiribati, July 8. *U.S. COAST GUARD*

HONOLULU – The island nation of Kiribati is surrounded by water. Too much of it, actually, because climate change and rising sea levels are endangering the 33 scattered small, sparsely populated and low-lying islands in the Gilbert, Phoenix and Line chain islands of Micronesia. And, safe drinking water is in short supply.

The government of the Republic of Kiribati recently declared a state of disaster last month due to lasting drought conditions caused by below normal rainfall.

Kiribati is 2,400 miles due south of Hawaii, about half way to Australia, and straddles the equator. It has a population of about 119,000, most of whom live on the island of Tarawa. The country's highest elevation is 266 feet above sea level on the island of Banaba.

The Pacific Humanitarian Air Service, operated by the United Nations World Food Programme and UNICEF, transported emergency supplies to Kiribati on July 7, to help with the emergency.

According to the World Food Programme, the delivery included essential supplies, including “water, sanitation, hygiene” and dignity kits with collapsible water containers, buckets with lids, water purification tablets and soap. The shipment also delivered portable water field testing kits to help Kiribati authorities monitor water quality at both source and household levels.

A 2018 declaration by the Pacific Islands Forum nations said climate change is the “single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.”

Melting polar ice and glaciers are causing the sea level to rise, endangering low-lying countries like Kiribati. In fact, the islands may become inhabitable in a matter of decades. Many small islands rely on rain catchment systems for drinking water, so severe drought has a negative impact on the population.

Honolulu-based Coast Fast Response Cutter USCGC Oliver Berry (WPC 1124) delivered potable drinking water to the island of Kiritimati, working with U.N. representatives to support the local residents amid the national state of emergency.

In addition to providing humanitarian assistance, the Oliver Berry crew supported Kiribati maritime law enforcement efforts, providing patrol coverage in Kiribati’s exclusive economic zone to deter illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, support Kiribati resource security and strengthen maritime governance in Oceania.

“The Oliver Berry’s patrol demonstrates the United States Coast Guard’s enduring commitment to our partner nations throughout Oceania,” said Howell. “Instances like these pave the way for future Coast Guard assets to support The Republic of Kiribati and its citizens.”

Amid the natural disaster is a political storm, too. Kiribati withdrew from a July 11-14 summit of Pacific Islands Forum leaders at the last minute, citing a lack of concern over issues important to the country.

The withdrawal coincides with efforts by China to have greater influence in Oceania.

The positive presence of a U.S. Coast Guard cutter and crew

sends a reassuring message of support at a critical time.