



### **As seas rise, the relocation of Caribbean islanders has begun**

**The government-managed movement of 300 families from the island of Gardi Sugdub is a test case for “planned retreat” in Latin America**

[The Economist, June 4, 2024](#)

Under a light Caribbean drizzle, volunteers load plastic chairs, a chest of drawers and a gas stove into a military motorboat. On board, men in uniform help an indigenous woman dressed in the traditional green-and-red blouse of the Guna people to step down from the wharf.

She is, or was, a resident of Gardi Sugdub, a tiny coral island about a kilometre off the northern coast of Panama. On June 3rd the Panamanian government began moving 300 families from the island to new government-built housing on the mainland. A changing climate and rising seas are slowly swamping the island, and 37 other inhabited islands nearby, most of which lie less than one metre above sea level. That level is rising 3.4 millimetres every year. Storms are becoming heavier and more frequent.





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Steve Paton of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama City says the islands will be uninhabitable by the end of the century.

Gardi Sugdub's families are the first to move. More may follow if things go well. "This is an historic event," says Rogelio Paredes, Panama's housing minister. "It's the first time in Latin America that, as a result of climate change, a whole community has been moved to a new place. The eyes of the world are on Gardi Sugdub."

But the notion of climate change driving unfortunate people from their homes is simplistic. Gardi Sugdub's older residents have certainly noticed the creeping effects of warming; rainy-season flooding has become more frequent, and waters now lap a little higher on the ankle. But for the past 20 years their main concern has been sanitation, not submersion. A growing population meant several families began to live in each of the the narrow, reed-walled houses. Outdoor space in which children could play was squeezed out. Water, supplied by a pipe from a river on the mainland, was scarce and intermittent. The island's lavatories are shacks at the end of piers which drop directly into the water below.

José Davis, the island's octogenarian leader, says the community first began planning a move in the 1990s. The idea received financial and technical support from the Inter-American Development Bank as a climate-migration project in 2018. The government then tendered contracts for the construction of the new settlement on the mainland.

The new village, christened Isber Yala after the local loquat trees, was built on farmland owned by the community, half an hour from Gardi Sugdub by boat and road. Three hundred beige plastic houses with tiled roofs sit in a grid pattern. Each has two bedrooms, a bathroom with running water, and an ample back garden.

Marcos Saira, head of architecture at the housing ministry, stresses that Isber Yala is the first project of its kind. With bigger budgets, more sophisticated housing developments could come later. But the relocating residents don't seem to mind. Within minutes of arriving at Isber Yala they had strung up hammocks, the Guna's preferred beds, from the houses' metal beams.

"It's pretty, it's bigger than I'm used to. I love it," says Yany Prestán, who is 46. On Gardi Sugdub she shared a house with four families; there was little privacy and frequent arguments over food and money. She wants to build a



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kitchen on the porch and two bedrooms in the garden to house her family of seven. The narrow patch of grass between the pavement and the drainage channel is perfect for a flowerbed.

One street over, 45-year-old Genaro Fernandez arrived early to build a reed fence round the perimeter of his plot. Shoots of plantain and manioc sprout from the ground.

There are problems. The electricity has yet to be connected. There is no rubbish-collection system and no public transport to the port, a big oversight given that most residents work in fishing and island tourism. The concrete shell of a planned hospital lies rotting in the sun.

But next to it is a large, modern school which will be open by the end of the year. With air-conditioned classrooms, dormitories and a soccer pitch, the school is a big draw for the new residents. Classes will be taught both in Spanish and Guna.

The Guna do not feel that the move will cause a major cultural dislocation either. They lived on the mainland 200 years ago, before moving to the islands to escape disease and conflict with Spanish colonists. Many ceremonial songs refer to the rivers and mountains of the mainland.

According to the UN, some 41m people in Latin America and the Caribbean live in coastal areas that are exposed to life-threatening storms and flooding. The Gardi Sugdub move looks like the sort of managed retreat that has a good chance of succeeding, largely because it serves other development goals, such as improved housing, sanitation and schooling. Sabrina Juran of the UN says managed-retreat programmes are more likely to succeed when they include communities in the decision-making, thereby meeting numerous needs.

### **To and fro**

After some initial scepticism, most on Gardi Sugdub accept that the waves will eventually claim their homes. But they will not abandon their island yet. Some of the new mainlanders say they intend to visit each weekend. Others say they will let their friends and cousins from crowded neighbouring islands string their hammocks there. One building on the island is being renovated. Its 64-year-old owner, Gustavo Denis, reckons that, with the competition moving to the mainland, it's the perfect time to open a new shop. ■



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## Photos



Iker (seven years old) plays on his family's dock on the island of Gardi Sugdub



A resident of Gardi Sugdub covering herself with an umbrella under heavy raining. This low-lying coral island is not only very vulnerable to rising sea levels; it is also greatly affected by storms and floods.



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## Photos cont'd



A young boy holds an injured bird he found on the main street of Gardi Sugdub. When the sun goes down and the heat softens, the streets of the island fill with life, especially with the children who have already finished their classes.



Lombardo is a young resident of Gardi Sugdub. In their house on the island, five families live together and only one of them will move to the new community on the mainland. He will stay for now.



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A Guna woman travels with her son on the regular transport between Gardi Sugdub and the Niga Kantule pier, on the mainland. Many of the island's inhabitants believe not having to use the boats daily will improve their lives, especially those who grow crops on the mainland.



Two Kuna women talking with a member of the National Civil Protection System of Panama (SINAPROC) at the Niga Kantule dock, Gunayala. On June 3rd, the official transfer of the first 50 families to the Isberyala community began.



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Florina Chieri Lopez, 60, and her daughter Luzdalia Lopez Bonilla walk on the streets of the Isberyala community on the way to their new home.

This family was one of the first to move, on June 2nd, a day before the authorities organised the official transfer of the first 50 families.

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