Headline: Is world ready for climate change refugees?

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Last week Agence France Presse reported on the case of a Pacific islander who had sought refugee status in New Zealand by arguing that his homeland, the island-nation Kiribati, is known to be sinking. His case received media attention. But the judge dismissed his case as “unconvincing” and “novel.”

Ioane Teitiota, 37, whose visa had expired, pleaded through his lawyers that he should not be deported because climate change is gradually destroying his place of residence in Kiribati (pronounced Kiribas).

In his ruling, High Court Judge John Priestly said Teitiota did not qualify as a refugee under international law. The judge acknowledged that Kiribati is suffering from environmental woes such as storm surges, flooding and water contamination that could be attributed to climate change, but stressed that so are millions of other people in low-lying countries.

Priestly cited the United Nations Refugee Convention stating that refugees must fear persecution if they returned home, and said Teitiota did not meet this requirement.

Petition denied. The Inquirer gave the story the margin-to-margin title “Islander fails in bid to become first climate change refugee.”

This story is relevant in view of the unprecedented magnitude, even by world standards, of the destruction wrought by Supertyphoon “Yolanda” (“Haiyan”) in parts of central Philippines, the awesome rehabilitation and reconstruction work ahead, and the human toll (more than 5,600 dead at this writing) that Yolanda left behind. Many survivors have been leaving the devastated landscape in droves to seek refuge, even if temporarily, in safer havens. Others may not want to go home again.

Which got me thinking: What do we have here, internal refugees? Not evacuees, whose flight and change of residence are more temporary in nature.

The term “internal refugees” was coined by human rights groups during the Marcos dictatorship. The military would drive out residents of entire villages in order to flush out suspected rebels. Many left their homes never to return again. I know some from the provinces who feared for their lives and resettled in Metro Manila. Some even sought political asylum abroad.

The world has seen different kinds of refugees in the last century. Refugees from political persecution, war, famine. Now, as in the first test case involving a Kiribati national, we have a climate change refugee. Is the world ready? This will be a new kind of refugee—from climate change, which is not entirely Mother Nature’s whim, but her wrathful reaction to humankind’s abuses against the planet. (Some extreme schools of thought may attribute the calamities to inexorable planetary or cosmic changes not of humankind’s making.)

According to Nature World News (NWN), Kiribati faces problems of rising sea levels and its increasing population. NWN reported that about half of the total head count, some 50,000 people, are already packed onto a small sand strip that measures six square miles. Countries such as

Kiribati and Tuvalu have been sinking over the past many years, but NWN cited a Reuters report that global warming might not be the sole cause of Kiribati's woes. Local traditions favoring large families and Church restrictions on family planning have led to population increase, overcrowding, disease, and infant mortality. Two friends of mine, both health education experts, worked in Kiribati many years ago. They didn't tell me about Kiribati's sinking then.

Agence France Presse reported that the UN Human Rights Commission is concerned that Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tokelau and the Maldives could become "stateless" because of climate change. NWN said Kiribati President Anote Tong has predicted that his country will be uninhabitable in the next 30 to 60 years because of sea level rise and contamination of freshwater. Among the options are moving the entire population to manmade islands and buying land in Fiji.

The Pacific region has some of the smallest nations on Earth which are most vulnerable to climate change. An Asian Development Bank report stressed the impact of climate change on the region's agriculture, fisheries, tourism, coral reefs and human health. Papua New Guinea, East Timor, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa and Solomon Islands are taking a bad hit.

Last September, the 15-nation Pacific Islands Forum signed the Majuro Declaration (named after the capital of Marshall Islands) which seeks pledges on cutting greenhouse gas emissions and adopting renewable energy.

Back to the local front. An Inquirer report (by correspondent Robert Gonzaga) said that Bataan, the site of the camp for refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (called "boat people" then) who fled communist rule two to three decades ago, could be a major relocation area for Yolanda survivors in search of new homes.

Some Bataan residents are open to the idea of Yolanda survivors either as temporary refugees or starting a new life in the province. They had welcomed Indochinese refugees in the past, they said, why not fellow Filipinos this time? The former camp in Morong, Bataan, is now the site of the Bataan Technology Park (area: approximately 360 hectares). Bases Conversion and Development Authority president Arnel Casanova said he's open to the idea.

Of course, there are pros and cons, so hold your horses. The refugee camp under the UN High Commissioner for Refugees had UN funding then. Bringing in Yolanda survivors will require logistics of the government kind. Jobs, skills and cultural integration are just a few issues. Will Yolanda survivors—refugees in their own country—even take the offer?

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