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Where will the climate refugees go?

by Amy Lieberman

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More than 19 million people from 100 different countries were forced to flee their homes in 2014 because of natural disasters [Christopher Furlong/Getty Images]

New York, US - No one can be sure just how many people will be displaced by climate change by the middle of this century. In fact, the estimates vary widely, with some putting the number at 25 million and others suggesting it could hit the one billion mark.

What is clear, however, is that cementing a number is not the only hurdle facing those attempting to decipher the practical ramifications of climate change. Terms such as "climate refugee" and "environmental refugee" are still not classified as legal categorisations. And it's difficult to determine whether a person is fleeing their home because of an environmental disaster, lack of work, or the established, long-term impacts of climate issues like drought or rising sea levels.

However, one factor is increasingly clear: This amorphous, global population of refugees does not have any international legal protection or agency upholding their basic human rights and helping to keep them safe.

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"Yes, there is a protection gap involving climate change refugees, but we don't call them climate refugees for the reason that they are not covered by the 1951 [Refugee] Convention," said Marine Franck, a climate change officer at the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR. That treaty extends only to people who have a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a social group or political opinion, and are unable, or unwilling to seek protection from their home countries.

This means that the estimated 200,000 Bangladeshis who become homeless each year due to river erosion cannot easily appeal for resettlement in another country. It also means that the residents of the small islands of Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu, where one in 10 has migrated within the past decade, can't be classified as refugees, even though those who remain are "trapped" in worsening environmental conditions.

Displaced every second



Oceans have warmed and risen, massive glaciers and ice sheets have diminished and extreme events, some scientists say, have become more intense or more frequent in certain regions [Nitin Kanotra/Hindustan Times via Getty Images]

The latest figures from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2015 report show that more than 19 million people from 100 countries were forced to flee their homes in 2014 because of natural disasters. Within that, national responses to disasters have been fragmented and systems that pre-empt consequences of environmental phenomena, less than adequate.

"One part of the issue is how to prevent people from being displaced and that is very important ... one person is displaced every second by a natural disaster. The numbers are huge," Franck said.

In the lead-up to the United Nations climate change conference in Paris, which concluded on December 12, climate change and human mobility activists, experts and academics worked to ensure that the connection between these issues is addressed appropriately. However, the two-week meeting largely centred on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and the eventual agreements governments reached focused on the reduction in global temperatures by 2100.

"We feel there is a need to recognise climate change and its impact on human mobility," said Alice Thomas, the climate displacement programme manager at the Washington, DC-based advocacy group Refugees International. "Our approach has been this needs to be supported through adaptation, which means that countries need to be prepared for this."

The consensus among scientific organisations, including those represented on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), is that the impact of human-induced greenhouse gas emissions visible today is unprecedented. Oceans have warmed and risen, massive glaciers and ice sheets have diminished and extreme events, like drought and tropical cyclones, some scientists say, have become more intense or more frequent in certain regions.

Sea level could creep to anywhere between about one metre, or three feet, up to three metres, or nearly 10 feet, by the year 2100, depending on CO2 concentrations in the air and the rate of melting that occurs in the Polar regions, among other factors.

This means that the melting of ice sheets in West Antarctica and Greenland could lead to a potentially two-metre - six-foot - sea level rise in major cities such as New York. Increases in temperature could make places like Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Qatar uninhabitable by 2071. And the list goes on.

These anticipated environmental changes will have enormous effects on many populations, especially those in coastal and low-lying areas like Vietnam, the Netherlands and certain parts of the US. Already, people are now twice as likely to be displaced than they were in the 1970s, according to Justin Ginnett, the head of data and analysis at the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. This is due to the combined effect of rapid population growth, urbanisation and exposure to natural disasters.

"The reason is pretty simple. There are more people on the planet today living in hazard prone areas, vulnerable to natural hazards than there were in the 1970s," Ginnett said in a phone interview. "There is a lot that is unknown but we do need to take action now and the best action we can take is to make sure that our thinking and planning is adaptive."

However climate refugees were not central to the talks this time around in Paris. The Paris COP21 conclusion agreement reportedly received a mixed welcome from participants and observers alike. The document does not mention "refugees" or other terms like "migration" and "mobility". It does, however, call for a task force to "develop recommendations for integrated approaches to avert, minimise and address displacement related to the adverse impacts of climate change".

This recommendation did touch upon previous calls by various organisations, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), for the establishment of a climate change displacement coordination facility solely devoted to climate-induced displacement.

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The details have yet to be formally ironed out, but the facility - not designed as an actual physical centre to house the displaced - could help arrange emergency relief and provide relocation support. It could also assess the risk of internal and cross-border environmental displacement and provide technical assistance to national governments.

However, it is not clear how the facility will be funded, who will govern it, or how it will be affiliated with the UN system.

The Nasen Initiative



Climate refugees do not have any international legal protection or agency upholding their basic human rights and helping keep them safe [Yawar Nazir/Getty Images]

The Nansen Initiative, a three-year-old state-led, consultative process aimed at building a consensus on a protection agenda for displaced people impacted by environmental disasters or climate change, supported the inclusion of human mobility challenges in the Paris agreement. It has not taken a formal stance on the climate displacement facility.

Headquartered in Geneva, The Nansen Initiative is among the champions of a multipronged way to approaching human mobility and climate change. More than 100 nations approved a non-legally binding agenda this October at a Nansen global consultation that prioritises protecting cross-border displaced persons and linking different national policies. This could extend to helping new arrivals stay in a country that admitted them, if they are unable to return to their homes because of prolonged environmental issues.

One important finding from the coalition's series of consultations in places as far apart as the Pacific Islands and the Greater Horn of Africa is the impact climate change is already having on people's ability to withstand disaster, said Atle Solberg, the head of the Nansen Initiative Secretariat.

"There is much more states can do to prevent displacement, compared to a conflict situation, when it comes to natural hazards and disasters," Solberg explained.

He emphasised the role development initiatives can play in the case of earthquakes, using the 2010 examples of Haiti and Chile. The Chile earthquake was an 8.8 on the moment magnitude scale while the Haiti earthquake was a 7.0. But the Haiti earthquake killed more than 230,000 people, while 525 died in the Chilean disaster.

"It's an issue of preparedness and the level of development related to urban planning and evacuation centres," Solberg said.

Beyond words



Identifying people forced to flee because of climate change can be difficult. One season of severe drought can knock out someone's crops, but farmers are very unlikely to attribute the food shortage immediately to extreme weather caused by climate change [Jackie Clausen/Sunday Times/Gallo Images/Getty Images]

Political concern surrounding displaced people and climate change has been present, bubbling under the surface for more than a decade. In the early and mid-2000s, Anwarul Chowdhury, the former UN High Commissioner for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, advocated for an expansion of the international legal definition of a refugee to include those forced out of their homes because of climate change. But Chowdhury, who also served as Bangladesh's ambassador to the UN, was met with a tepid response from other diplomats.

But it seems that support for this has now materialised beyond academic circles to some degree, particularly since the Nansen Initiative was founded, according to Refugees International's Alice Thomas.

Experts are moving beyond the singular approach of expanding the Refugee Convention to include those impacted by climate change or environmental disasters, suggesting that to address such a large issue, states must focus on more than just terminology.

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"No one - scholars or anyone - thinks changing the convention is the way to do it, so if the convention is not the correct place to address the issue, what does the phrase really mean?" said Alex Randall, the head of the UK Climate Change and Migration Coalition. "Some people think it could take decades to negotiate this further and there is also an emerging consensus that it could be addressed using a whole new international agreement."

Ultimately, there are many options floating around, and it is "unclear which is going to be the ticket", Randall explained.

As of now, people who intend to declare themselves a refugee because of an environmental disaster or climate change have no opportunity for recourse, said Michael Gerrard, an environmental law professor at Columbia University in New York. A New Zealand court recently shot down the case of a Kiribati man who fought to become recognised as a climate change refugee. He was deported back to his [home country](#).

Gerrard first stumbled across the question of legal rights for climate refugees in 2005, when the Marshall Islands' UN ambassador approached him seeking legal guidance. The Marshall Islands, Palau and Kiribati all have a special arrangement with the US that allows citizens to migrate freely.

However, there is generally a lack of national policies to prevent displacement, according to Franck, of UNHCR. She stressed the importance of including citizens in this process, as displaced people in the Philippines were not consulted on their relocation following the typhoon a few years ago.

Identifying people affected by climate change can be difficult, warn experts like Franck. One season of severe drought can knock out someone's crops, but farmers and scientists alike are unlikely to immediately attribute the resulting food shortage to extreme weather caused by climate change. For example, multiple studies linked [Australia's record-setting heat wave](#) in 2013, stretching into 2014, to climate change. But typically, connecting climate change to extreme weather is not easy, given the complexity of the events.

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"Even when you ask people from Pacific Nations why they moved they will give you similar answers about livelihood and work and being able to get a visa for some countries and not others," said Randall. "It is difficult if we cannot isolate this group, how do we create a legal framework for them?"

UNHCR's communication officer Andreas Needham said he has observed this during his work, with some Somalis arriving in Kenyan refugee camps following periods of drought citing livelihood as their prime reason for migrating.

As such, ambiguities remain and a devastating drought or a massive tropical cyclone might not push a person into the unofficial category of an environmental or climate refugee.

However, there is still a strong likelihood that extreme events like these may become even more intense and more frequent. These erratic weather patterns and warming temperatures could essentially make areas of the world uninhabitable, possibly displacing millions, and may make hopes many have of establishing a home, a virtual impossibility.

SOURCE: **AL JAZEERA**
