



## NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE- THE PLIGHT OF CLIMATE REFUGEES

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### INTRODUCTION

"No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land"<sup>1</sup>

Syria. For anyone following the news, the word evokes images of debris, destruction and dying children. The civil war in Syria is called by many as the worst manmade crisis of our time<sup>2</sup>. As the war enters its ninth year, chemical weapons, cluster bombs, disease and starvation have already left half a million dead and half the population displaced<sup>3</sup>. The war has pushed close to five million people to flee the country and seek refuge elsewhere. The whole affair is of course a depressing reminder in what humans can do to each other, especially when one sees pictures of Syrian children killed in chemical attacks. But what few

people know is that this whole conflict was triggered in part, by global warming<sup>4</sup>. Mother Nature colluded with man in creating this crisis.

The Syrian civil war was preceded by a prolonged and devastating drought that drove a mass of rural workers into Syrian cities. The severity of the drought combined with the Regime's failure to prepare and respond to it, sparked widespread protests from the citizenry. The Regime's crackdown on this civil uprising and the ensuing escalation of the conflict led to a full blown civil war with domestic and foreign forces on both sides of the conflict. It has also birthed the worst refugee crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (so far). The Syrian civil war is just an example of how climate change is already starting to catalyze international conflicts.

The people of Syria are fleeing war, not floods or forest fires. Climate change is not the direct cause of their migration. They aren't what one could call a 'climate refugee' or an 'environmental refugee'. These phrases refer to people who are driven out of their homes by the more serious

<sup>1</sup> Warsan Shire

<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/no-one-puts-their-children-in-a-boat-unless-the-wa/>.

<sup>2</sup> Dylan Collins, SYRIA WAR: 'WORST MAN-MADE DISASTER SINCE WORLD WAR II' GCC NEWS | AL JAZEERA (2017),

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/syria-war-worst-man-disaster-world-war-ii-170315054907704.html> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help, WORLD VISION (2019),

<https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts> (last visited Mar 8, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Ian Sample, GLOBAL WARMING CONTRIBUTED TO SYRIA'S 2011 UPRISING, SCIENTISTS CLAIM THE GUARDIAN (2015),

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/02/global-warming-worsened-syria-drought-study> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, SYRIA CONFLICT AT 5 YEARS: THE BIGGEST REFUGEE AND DISPLACEMENT CRISIS OF OUR TIME DEMANDS A HUGE SURGE IN SOLIDARITY UNHCR (2016),

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2016/3/56e6e3249/syria-conflict-5-years-biggest-refugee-displacement-crisis-time-demands.html> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).



manifestations of climate change, like rising sea levels and extreme weather patterns.

The current debate on environmental migrants is built on the definition provided by Essam El-Hinnawi in the mid-1980s. He defined environmental refugees as "people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption that jeopardized their existence or seriously affected the quality of their life"<sup>6</sup>.

Climate change is rapidly becoming one of the biggest reasons for migration around the globe. The office of the UNHCR estimates that rising sea levels, intense droughts and other extreme weather patterns will uproot 250 million people by 2050<sup>7</sup>. Most of these refugees are expected to come from developing nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Displacement due to climate change affects not only coastal countries but also rich landlocked countries, safe from the rising

sea. These countries would have to deal with the sudden influx of climate refugees knocking on their doors. They would also have to deal with extreme weather events internally displacing their own population within their borders. They cannot build a wall to keep cyclones out. Nor can they deport their own citizens.

As the slow tsunami consumes coastal nations and weather events turn extreme, it becomes critical to determine the status of climate refugees and undertake international efforts to address this problem.

HOW BAD IS THE CLIMATE REFUGEE CRISIS?

*"First I blame for the Island Nations. I did nothing because I wasn't in an Island Nation..."*

Floods, Hurricanes, Earthquakes, Drought and Famine- our ancestors saw these phenomena as divine retribution. We still use the word 'Act of God' to refer to these events. But if the climate scientists are to be believed, 'God' seems to be getting more and more vengeful by the year. Manmade climate change has contributed to ever-rising sea levels and unprecedented weather events in every continent.

Climate refugees are already looking for new homes in many countries. In coastal Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of people are routinely uprooted by the flooding. Many make a long and treacherous journey to the slums of the capital, Dhaka. The disappearance of Lake Chad in West Africa has empowered terrorists and forced

<sup>6</sup> Renner, Michael, Environment a Growing Driver in Displacement of People, IS MEAT SUSTAINABLE? | WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE, <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5888> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Bhanu Sridharan, 'NOT DOING ANYTHING IS NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE': A CONVERSATION WITH ALICE THOMAS, CLIMATE REFUGEE EXPERT PACIFIC STANDARD (2018), <https://psmag.com/environment/not-doing-anything-is-no-longer-acceptable-a-conversation-with-alice-thomas-climate-refugee-expert> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).



more than four million people into camps<sup>8</sup>. In India, close to 1.5 million people are internally displaced every year, many for climate change reasons. Not even the mighty USA is safe from Mother Nature, as a slew of hurricanes, forest fires and cold waves left thousands dead and thousands more without a home in 2018. Meanwhile, the steady drip, drip, drip of the melting polar ice caps continues.

Climate change will not impact all people and countries in the same way. Countries with a broad coastline and Island nations will be the immediate and most severely affected victims. One can weather a hurricane and rebuild his home after it passes. But that won't be an option when the ocean arrives at his doorstep and drags his home underwater. Doing so would mean sleeping with the fishes, in more ways than one.

While floods ravage some areas, others will be reduced to deserts. Desertification and depletion of resources like water and fertile land will aggravate poverty, incite conflicts, political crises and mass population displacement. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that by 2080, about 1.1 to 3.2 Billion (with a B) people will experience water scarcity and 200 to 600 million will go to their beds hungry<sup>9</sup>. These people will inevitably make

long treks looking for new homes, for survival. 'These people' could be you and me.

Even in a relatively wealthy isolationist nation which is willing to turn refugees away at its border, frequent and devastating natural disasters are bound to destroy homes and displace its citizens. This will hit the poorest of its population the hardest as they can't afford to migrate internationally and escape the effects of climate change<sup>10</sup>. The rich will barricade themselves in their mansions or fly private jets to their summer resorts, indifferent to the plight of their fellow nationals. This may inflame class conflict within that country, leaving its economy fragile and its government on edge. Climate change will not only affect areas environmentally and economically, but culturally and politically too. Such tensions within countries are likely to have ripple effects in their dealings with others and could sour international relations. And whenever local conflicts bleed into international relations, the threat of nuclear weapons looms in the background like a mushroom cloud.

All this may sound alarmist, but it is good to scope out the full extent of a problem before looking for solutions.

<sup>8</sup> Tim McDonnell, THE REFUGEES THE WORLD BARELY PAYS ATTENTION TO NPR (2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/06/20/621782275/the-refugees-that-the-world-barely-pays-attention-to> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> John Vidal, CLIMATE CHANGE TO FORCE MASS MIGRATION THE GUARDIAN (2007), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2007/may>

<sup>10</sup> /14/climatechange.climatechangeenvironment (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Bhanu Sridharan, 'NOT DOING ANYTHING IS NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE': A CONVERSATION WITH ALICE THOMAS, CLIMATE REFUGEE EXPERT PACIFIC STANDARD (2018), <https://psmag.com/environment/not-doing-anything-is-no-longer-acceptable-a-conversation-with-alice-thomas-climate-refugee-expert> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).



## STATUS OF CLIMATE REFUGEES IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

The 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention defines a 'refugee' as a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". Coming out of recent horrors of the Holocaust and the Second World War, this was a pretty solid definition for a refugee. One can't fault the makers of the Convention for not including a provision for climate refugees. The concept of global warming and climate change only went mainstream three decades later.

The 1951 Convention offers protection for those fleeing persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. It provides no solace to people persecuted by nature. Since climate refugees lacked any formal definition or recognition under international law for a long time, they were essentially left in no-man's land. To date<sup>11</sup>, no person has been granted asylum only on the grounds of fleeing the effects of climate change. There was clearly a protection gap in the international system that needed to be addressed<sup>12</sup>.

The first international instrument to recognise climate change as a driver of

migration<sup>13</sup> is the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration<sup>14</sup> (GCM) which was adopted on the tenth of December, 2018. Among its many provisions, the Compact calls on U.N. members to-

- I. Strengthen joint analysis and sharing of information to better map, understand, predict and address migration movements resulting from climate change, while ensuring the effective respect, protection and fulfillment of the human rights of all migrants.
- II. Develop adaptation and resilience strategies to counter adverse effects of climate change, taking into account the potential implications on migration, while recognizing that adaptation in the country of origin is a priority.
- III. Integrate displacement considerations into disaster preparedness strategies and promote cooperation with neighboring and other relevant countries to prepare for early warning, contingency planning, stockpiling, coordination mechanisms,

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Beeler, UN COMPACT RECOGNIZES CLIMATE CHANGE AS DRIVER OF MIGRATION FOR FIRST TIME PUBLIC RADIO INTERNATIONAL (2018), <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-12-11/un-compact-recognizes-climate-change-driver-migration-first-time> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, Final Draft, 11 July 2018, [https://www.google.co.in/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUK EwiUxMSp49ngAhWBo48KHYIEB\\_wQFjAAegQIDRAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Frefugeesmigrants.un.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F180711\\_final\\_d raft\\_0.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0C3KDNosahYREtPMJEB-ES](https://www.google.co.in/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUK EwiUxMSp49ngAhWBo48KHYIEB_wQFjAAegQIDRAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Frefugeesmigrants.un.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F180711_final_d raft_0.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0C3KDNosahYREtPMJEB-ES).

<sup>11</sup> February 2019.

<sup>12</sup> António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees.



evacuation planning, reception and assistance arrangements, and public information.

- IV. Harmonize and develop approaches and mechanisms at sub-regional and regional levels to address the vulnerabilities of persons affected by sudden-onset and slow-onset natural disasters, by ensuring they have access to humanitarian assistance that meets their essential needs with full respect for their rights wherever they are, and by promoting sustainable outcomes that increase resilience and self-reliance, taking into account the capacities of all countries involved.

- V. Develop coherent approaches to address the challenges of migration movements in the context of sudden-onset and slow-onset natural disasters, including by taking into consideration relevant recommendations from State-led consultative processes.

This document is a great first drop in the ocean of protecting climate refugees. However, it is a voluntary and nonbinding instrument. Prominent countries like the USA and Brazil refused to sign it, while many European countries like Belgium withdrew<sup>15</sup>. The Compact also does not clearly define climate refugees. It leaves that piece of business to the discretion of the respective countries.

A proper definition must comprise all types of environmental migrants fleeing

from all kinds of environmental disasters. The International Organisation for Migration<sup>16</sup> proposes three such types.

- (i) *Environmental emergency migrants*: These are people who flee temporarily due to an environmental disaster or sudden environmental event. (Example- Someone forced to leave due to a hurricane)
- (ii) *Environmental forced migrants*: These are people who are forced to leave due to deteriorating environmental conditions. (Example- Someone forced to leave due to desertification)
- (iii) *Environmentally induced economic migrants*: These are people who choose to leave to avoid possible future problems. (Example: A farmer who leaves due to declining crop productivity due to desertification)

Individual countries may define the term narrowly and in doing so, may set impossible standards for some types of environmental refugees in seeking asylum. It is far more effective if there is an international framework for determining who counts as a climate refugee.

#### CLIMATE REFUGEES IN INDIA

As was referenced earlier, roughly 1.5 million people are internally displaced every year in India, mostly due to the effects of climate change<sup>17</sup>. In 2018, Northeast India

<sup>15</sup> UN conference adopts global migration pact despite withdrawals, FRANCE 24 (2018), <https://www.france24.com/en/20181210-united-nations-conference-adopts-migration-pact-morocco> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> International Organization for Migration's Perspective on Migration and Climate Change, Archived 8 August 2009 at the [Library of Congress](#).

<sup>17</sup> Nandan Sharalaya, TAKING INDIA'S CLIMATE MIGRANTS SERIOUSLY THE DIPLOMAT (2018),



was ravaged by flash floods affecting over 100,000 people in Assam alone. The situation was equally worse in Tripura, Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The seven sisters weren't the only states affected in 2018. The state of Kerala witnessed one of the worst floods in nearly a century that killed over 400 people and many more missing. A UN report in 2018 estimated that India has lost \$80 Billion to Natural disasters in the last two decades<sup>18</sup>.

India is still heavily dependent on agriculture. Around 70% of the Indian population depends on farming, either directly or indirectly. The agriculture sector hosts around 58% of the employment in the country<sup>19</sup>. Most of these farmers already live at subsistence levels. Their livelihood largely depends on the traditional Monsoon patterns in their respective areas. If the rain patterns change, that would mean hundreds of millions of people who suddenly find that they're unable to feed themselves. The amount of migration that could result from a situation like this would be unparalleled in human history<sup>20</sup>. Speaking on this issue at an

international food conference in Milan, the Former President of the United States, Barack Obama rightly pointed out that the worst effects of climate change would be borne by people in poor nations that are least equipped to handle it.

Another important category of climate migrants to consider in the context of India are those who move from Bangladesh into India. Coastal Bangladesh, with a fourth of its land just five feet above sea level, is one of the 'potential impact hotspots' in the world. It is routinely threatened by extreme river floods. In the last three decades, almost 10 million Bangladeshis have been rendered homeless as a consequence of increasing erosion in the Brahmaputra basin. The sheer number of refugees generated in these events would be unmanageable for any government. Forecasts estimate that around 50 to 120 million people in Bangladesh affected by floods and saltwater intrusions may end up knocking at India's doors<sup>21</sup>.

It is worth mentioning here that India is one of the few countries in the world that has refused to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention. This means that climate migrants coming into India will find themselves labeled as 'illegal immigrants'. In a country like India where competition

<https://thedi diplomat.com/2018/08/taking-indias-climate-migrants-seriously/> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> India Lost \$80bn to Natural Disasters in Last Two Decades: UN Report, THE WEATHER CHANNEL (2018), <https://weather.com/en-IN/india/news/news/2018-10-11-united-nations-climate-disaster-economic-loss-india> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Dependency of Indian Agriculture on Monsoon, SKYMET WEATHER SERVICES (2017), <https://www.skymetweather.com/content/agriculture-and-economy/dependency-of-indian-agriculture-on-monsoon/> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Ian Johnston Environment Correspondent @montaukian, OBAMA HAS JUST MADE THE MOST

SERIOUS WARNING ON CLIMATE CHANGE YET THE INDEPENDENT (2017), <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/barack-obama-climate-change-refugee-crisis-human-history-unprecedented-global-warming-paris-a7727881.html> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Pathways to Development , Forced Migration: Climate Refugees in The Indian Subcontinent, OFFPRINT (2017), <http://offprint.in/en/articles/forced-migration-climate-refugees-in-the-indian-subcontinent> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).



for jobs and resources are already very high, a refugee crisis of this scale can easily be exploited for political gain. Current migration from Bangladesh has already resulted in low-scale conflicts<sup>22</sup>. India has begun building an India-Bangladesh Barrier. The officially stated purpose of this barrier is to deter drug trade, but in the future, this barrier may also keep out desperate climate refugees coming in from Bangladesh<sup>23</sup>.

India, with its rapidly growing population and vulnerable neighbours, has to come up with a comprehensive policy to address climate refugees both within and without its borders.

### SUGGESTIONS

The war on climate change should be fought on two fronts and will require the participation of the whole planet. On one front, the International community should be working overtime on reducing global warming and reversing the effects of climate change. At the same time, it also has to provide a home for the people already rendered homeless by climate change. Below are a few suggestions for achieving this goal.

1. Full implementation of the 2015 Paris global climate agreement.

2. An international framework for defining who constitutes a 'climate refugee'.
3. An international framework for recognition and protection of the rights of climate refugees.
4. Adaptation and resilience measures for reducing displacement risk, in the form of early warning systems, flood-defense infrastructure, sustainable agriculture and drought resistant crops.
5. Drafting of internal migration policies by individual nation-states in order to aid and resettle persons internally displaced by climate change.

### CONCLUSION

"The perennial cry to "Save Earth" is odd. Planet Earth survives massive asteroid strikes – it'll survive anything we throw at it. But Life on Earth will not<sup>24</sup>."

Climate change is one of the most serious threats facing life on Earth. Beyond natural disasters and rising seas, climate change serves as a 'threat multiplier' by exacerbating conflict over resources and driving mass migration. Migration of Climate refugees will be the major humanitarian challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is highly imperative that the international community is adequately prepared in rising to this challenge.

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<sup>22</sup> William Alex Litchfield, RAZOR TIE ARTERY FOUNDATION ANNOUNCE NEW JOINT VENTURE RECORDINGS | RAZOR & TIE (2010), <https://web.archive.org/web/20110720133948/http://www1.american.edu/ted/ice/Bangladesh.html> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> James Randerson, Harriet Grant & John Vidal, UK SHOULD OPEN BORDERS TO CLIMATE REFUGEES, SAYS BANGLADESHI MINISTER THE GUARDIAN (2009), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/nov/30/rich-west-climate-change> (last visited Mar 1, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Neil Degrasse Tyson, Astrophysicist.