

**Forum:** United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP)

**Issue # 1:** Measures to address the protection of climate refugees

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### Guiding Questions as you Read

Are environmental migrants considered climate refugees? If not, could a resolution tackle this issue?

What operations are being made by your country to solve this issue?

How does climate change affect your country's population?

What is your country's opinion of creating international law to support environmental migrants?

## Introduction

### Key Terms

Environmental refugees  
Climate refugees  
Humanitarian crisis  
Sudden onsets  
Slow onsets

Environmental hazards create disasters that destroy houses, societies, villages, cities, and even countries. Per year, millions of humans are obligated to migrate from one place to another (internationally or nationally) because of climate hazards. These populations are called **environmental refugees or climate refugees**. This issue causes controversy within countries and organizations because of the rise of nationalism, anti-immigrant, and xenophobia in the USA and European countries, limiting the protection given to climate refugees. In 2018, the World Bank estimated that in three regions (Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia) that by 2050, 143 million people will be environmental migrants. Additionally, in 2017, 68.5 million people became environmental migrants. One-third of these people became environmental migrants, because of sudden weather events, in other words, "**sudden onsets**", flooding, forest fires after droughts, and intensified storms. While the other two-thirds of the people were displaced because of humanitarian crises or events known as "**slow onsets**", such as desertification, sea-level rise, ocean acidification, air pollution, rain pattern shifts, or loss of biodiversity. Furthermore, climate migrants are not considered to be refugees as

“‘Refugee’ is a legal term which has a very specific meaning centering on a *“well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”* (Art. 1, 1951 Refugee Convention)”(University, United Nations.) Therefore, according to this convention, climate migrants are not considered refugees. The issue behind the migration of humans due to environmental reasons is that there is no international law that helps and further suggests countries to accept certain environmental refugees. However, this issue can not be ignored: as the amount of climate refugees is continuously increasing, so is the demand for the help required to protect climate migrants.



**Comprehension Question(s):** Do you understand that environmental migrants are not considered refugees?

## Definition of Key Terms

### **Environmental refugees:**

Environmental refugees are those who have to migrate domestically or internationally, because of changes in their environments. Another term used to describe those who lost their homes due to changes in the environment is “disaster displacement”.

### **Climate refugees:**

The term climate refugees are used to describe those who were forced to move due to the consequences of climate change. Another term used to describe climate refugees is “climate migrants”.

### **Humanitarian crisis:**

A humanitarian crisis is a situation in which the health, safety, security, and well-being of a large group of individuals are threatened.

### **Sudden onsets:**

Disasters that are sudden and unexpected, often associated with hydro-meteorological hazards, including flooding, windstorms, and mudslides, or geophysical hazards such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions.

### **Slow onsets:**

Slow onset disasters are those that are related to environmental degradation. These are predictable and develop gradually over time. Examples of this include droughts, desertification, rising sea levels, and more.

### **Climate change:**



Climate change is a term used to describe the long-term changes to Earth's climate driven by fossil fuel burning, and the emission of greenhouse gases that are trapped in the Earth's atmosphere, therefore raising Earth's surface temperature.

### **Displacement:**

The movement of somebody or something from one place to another. On the topic of climate refugees, the displacement of people refers to those that were forced to move someplace else. When referring to displaced persons, the cause of their moving usually involves wars, persecution, or natural disasters.

### **Natural disasters:**

Natural disasters refer to events including but not limited to: floods, hurricanes, earthquakes. That involves the loss of resources or life.

### **Exodus:**

The term exodus refers to a large number of people that collectively move, and immigrate.

## **Current Situation**

### **Key Terms**

Climate change  
Displacement  
Natural disasters  
Exodus

One of the many consequences of climate change is the displacement of people. This happens because climate change influences environments by causing natural disasters and a shortage of basic necessities such as drinkable water and more. When this happens, these displaced people are recognized as climate refugees or climate migrants, and their circumstance causes them to be in high-stress situations, often left unhoused, and forced to leave everything behind.

Although these people go through many struggles, there is almost no representation in the media that highlights these struggles, as well any recognition or protection under international law. This means that climate refugees are incredibly vulnerable and continue to face struggles that are worsened constantly by climate change and its consequences, as well as the issues that arise because of the ongoing pandemic of Covid-19.

### ***Climate change and environmental disasters***

Climate change is entirely connected to environmental disasters. According to USGS: "As more water vapor is evaporated into the atmosphere, it becomes fuel for more powerful storms to develop. More heat in the atmosphere and warmer ocean surface temperatures can lead to increased wind speeds in tropical storms. Rising sea levels expose higher locations not usually subjected to the power of the sea and to the erosive forces of waves and currents." This means that climate change directly affects the environment and ecosystems in ways that are threatening to our planet, and to different populations. For instance, climate change influences the rising sea levels that have caused 44 pacific islands to completely disappear, therefore, forcing an **exodus** of people to move out of these islands.

### ***Climate stressors and forced migration***

"Since 2008, an average of 24 million people have been displaced by catastrophic weather disasters, each year" (NPR). That alarming number is only expected to rise as climate change worsens, and rising sea levels, flooding, wildfires, and droughts become more frequent and aggravated. These **natural disasters** that are the cause of forced migration, are also known as climate stressors. Climate stressors are "a condition, event, or trend related to climate variability and change that can exacerbate hazards" (US climate resilience). These hazards cause people to migrate domestically and

internationally, in order to escape their inhabitable environments. An example of an exodus due to a natural disaster was when Mozambique was hit by a cyclone in 2019. In that crisis alone, 1.85 million people were in need of assistance, 146,000 people were internally displaced, 1 billion dollars worth of infrastructure was destroyed, 100,000 homes were damaged, and 1 million acres of crops were demolished. Because of climate change, scientists expect that disasters like these will be continuously more common, which creates a series of issues that have to be handled by the international community including the increase of large-scale forced migration as a result of resource scarcity and extreme weather events, which is predicted to cause disruptions in the international community, as well as national and global governance. The increase in the severity and quantity of disease outbreaks will also be a concerning consequence of the increase of natural disasters.

### ***Lack of protective laws towards the protection of climate refugees***

Climate migrants, who have to move from intolerable living conditions to safer countries, do so without any international assistance. This is because legal conditions that are offered to refugees are not extended to climate migrants, even though they go through similar struggles. And because there has been little action taken by the international community regarding climate migrants in the past, countries do not feel responsible nor pressured to provide assistance to this group of people. According to the "United Nations, Global trends: forced displacement in 2018" report, there are 20.4 million refugees that are under the protection of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), however, every year, 21.5 million people are forced to migrate because of sudden-onset hazards. These people are in need of international assistance and lack such protection and attention from international organizations, because of this they go to places they can go, instead of places they should go. As the numbers of

climate migrants continue to increase, it becomes more difficult for the international community to ignore this issue.

### ***Covid-19 and forced migration***

The Covid-19 pandemic has been incredibly inconvenient for refugees, migrants, and displaced people. Many of the climate migrants that were fleeing from natural disasters, were forced to go back to their former countries or cities. Not only does this put them in an unsafe position, but it harms the environment by overwhelming an already fragile ecosystem. Climate migrants are also over-exposed to Covid-19, and they can not properly protect themselves from the virus, as they are not able to social distance and follow other necessary protective measures. The pandemic has also disadvantaged many climate migrants as they no longer receive remittances, and lost much of their source of income due to Covid-19.





**Comprehension Questions:** What effects does climate refugees have on your country? If it does affect your country, how does it? Economically, culturally, etc.?

With any sort of power, could your delegation help with tackling this issue? How? What could be beneficial to the whole world that only your country has?

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

### The United States

Over the past few years, the United States has seen a rapid increase in the worrisome states around the US, towards the increase of climate refugees and how that could impact current and future societies. In 2016, Louisiana had its first legal case of climate refugees. On this specific occasion, it was the residents of the Isle de Jean Charles, located in the southeast part of Louisiana. Residents of the Isle de Jean Charles are part of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe, a tribe that economically depends on fishing, agriculture, and trapping. In 1955, Isle de Jean Charles was 22,000 acres, today, 98% of the landmass was lost due to the Coastal Erosion happening in Louisiana, where Extended land masses are being overflowed because of the rising waters caused by climate change. This issue has not only affected our present but is to be predicted that this will affect the impact Hurricanes have on the Louisiana State.

### China

Likewise the United States, China have seen an increase in the number of climate refugees present in their country. In 2015, in the North-central province of Ningxia,

China, 350,000 people had to be displaced by governmental transports to other cities where they wouldn't be as vulnerable to natural disasters and to the modification of the patterns of rain. However, this isn't the biggest relation China has to this topic. Similar to the United States, China is one of the countries that most southeastern Asian climate refugees go to and seek a better life because of the economic opportunity present in China. The Chinese government has already allocated certain refugees to agricultural areas in China as most Asian climate refugees are originally farmers.

### Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries in Southeast Asia to suffer from climate change. Its low elevation and high population with inadequate infrastructure, raise a sign of alert towards any climate hazards in Bangladesh, which would eventually harm the country's economy that is heavily reliant on farming. Bangladesh suffers from storms, cyclones, drought, erosion, landslides, floodings are already making many Bangladeshi migrate. It is to be expected that by 2050, one out of seven people in Bangladesh will have to migrate, internally or externally, to other places because of climate change impacts. Up to 18 million people are expected to have to migrate only because of the sea-level rise. Furthermore, Bangladesh is expected to lose 11% of its territory because of sea-level rise.

### Pakistan

Likewise Bangladesh, Pakistan is another country that forms the list of countries extremely affected by the effects of climate change on our environment. In more elevated areas, Glaciers have been melting due to the increase in temperature, creating flooding around nearby villages. Similar to most Asian countries, agriculture plays a fundamental role in their economics. Pakistan has been affected as climate change is an alternating rain pattern, creating floods that directly impact the

production and well-being of the country's agriculture. This issue doesn't only occur in more elevated areas, Pakistan's southern areas are also being affected by floods as sea-level rise has already flooded around 1.2 million acres around the southern coast. Due to floods, the country has registered a depletion of natural water resources around rural areas. Pakistan will need \$7-\$15 billion to solve this issue. By itself, it cannot be treated.

### Central American Countries

As the climate crisis only grows, many Central American countries are suffering because of storms, cyclones, droughts, and mostly, hurricanes. El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras are the countries that are being most affected by these natural disasters. Thousands of people are migrating to Mexico and reaching the border to the USA to reach for asylum, as in their countries, they are extremely vulnerable to be impacted by Natural Disasters. One of the reasons Central Americans are migrating is because of the impact climate change has on agricultural livelihood. Since 2014, extreme drought has been seen on the Pacific coast, impacting farmers from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Coffee production, one of the most important aspects of these countries' economies, is being affected as coffee is vulnerable and sensitive to any type of weather variations. The World Bank has estimated that if this continues, 2 million people will be forced to leave their countries and seek help in neighboring countries. In case of worsening, this number could pass the 4 million people mark.

### Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event	Effect on Issue:
1827	French polymath Jean-Baptiste Fourier	This demonstrates how this issue has

	predicts the change in the atmosphere and that it would get warmer due to the Greenhouse effect. (First analogy of greenhouse)	been "poaching" our lives since 1827 and that global warming isn't new news.
1890-1940	World's average temperature increases by 0.25 C°	Scientists start to believe the greenhouse effect as it was seen in the American Dust Bowl(A megadrought in California caused by the greenhouse effect.
1958	Carbon dioxide levels were started to be measured at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii, USA.	Scientists started to realize that the rise in the production of Carbon Dioxide was affecting our environments. It demonstrates how
April 22nd, 1970	First Earth Day	Launched the known "environmental decade" that led to a creation of various environmental acts .
1979	"First World Climate Conference adopts climate change as a major issue and calls on governments "to foresee and prevent potential man-made changes in climate.""(Marshall)	Demonstrates the creation of worrisome countries and organizations started to develop.
1987	At those times ,it was recorded to be the warmest year since recording started taking place.	The 1980s were the worst decade in the century with seven out of eight warmest years recorded until 1990.
1990	It is found out that the Earth has	"IPCC warns that only strong measures

	warmed by 0.5 C°.	to halt rising greenhouse gas emissions will prevent serious global warming. This provides scientific clout for UN negotiations for a climate convention. Negotiations begin after the UN General Assembly in December."(Marshall) As the year comes to an end and a new decade starts, the United Nations starts taking action towards finding viable ways to solve global warming with the help of as many countries as possible.
2000	Earth's temperature has increased to 0.8 C° since the start of recording.	The World's temperature increases, creating new predictions of what might be the Earth in 2100.
2015	As of 2015, the Earth's temperature has passed the 1 C° increase mark.	This generates an impact to many scholars that start teaching kids and younger ones the science behind the greenhouse effect.
2 November , 2015	The first climate migrant is reported in the Pacific Islands, Kiribati.	A father of three, pledges for asylum in Australia as his islands in Kiribati have started to overflow with the rise of sea level. His request to be a legal refugee is denied as Australia did not recognize his case as a refugee. However, this case created more climate refugees



that had a similar situation and were in need of help.

## Past International Action

### First cases creating a glimpse of the future

As the climate change crisis worsens, each year, more people are being forced to migrate internationally or nationally to other places to seek a life where they can live without the fear of a natural disaster, destroying their villages. This growing crisis has created one peculiar situation that apparently is looking to not be the last. The first ever official climate refugee, Ioane Teitiota, is a father of three from Kiribati, a small country island in the Pacific Northwest. Ioane lives in Kiribati and has said that he has been highly affected by the sea level rise caused by climate change, he already started taking action to create protections towards this issue by making his house one meter higher from the sea and creating a new potable water container that isn't enough for his family. He sought asylum in New Zealand however, he was currently denied for his acceptance as a climate refugee as he didn't seem to be in desperate need of help and that his situation was questionable. However, Ioane's case opened a crack to what could be a glimpse of the future. Andrew Harper, Special Adviser on Climate Change to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "In the past, national asylum authorities could dismiss an asylum case if the asylum-seeker claimed they were forced to leave their home country for environmental reasons, Harper explained. This recent case sets a new precedent because it recognizes that an imminent, life-threatening risk could arise as a consequence of climate change. As a result, national asylum authorities will now have to undertake an individual determination of each environmental claim." (Wernick, Adam) Furthermore, Mr. Harper also mentioned some states have already contacted the UNHCR to see what implication will be taken to those future "Ioanes".



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### Climate migrants supporting organizations

There are three main international organizations taking care of this issue: The International Organization for Migrations(IOM), The Environmental Justice Foundation(EJF) and finally, Climate refugees. All of these organizations support and create campaigns over all the continents to promote a modification of international law and rights, regarding people that are being forced to move out of their original countries because of climate change. Together, all these three organizations are in the *forefront* of operational, research, policy and advocacy efforts of environmental migrants.

### UN Involvement

The United Nations plays an important role in controlling this issue. This is because the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), has an action plan in place that is responsible for acting upon three main branches that stem from disaster displacement. These three branches include: Law and policy, where the UN provides legal support, and advice to the international community, regarding the protection and acceptance of refugees and climate migrants, this also enhances and provokes international discussions on the rights of displaced people. Operations, this branch in the action plan is responsible for the reduction of environmental degradation in displacement zones, besides ensuring the preparation of host communities. This branch is also responsible for the anticipation and to “address the root causes of displacement to reduce the reasons why people are displaced in the first place”(UNHCR). And lastly, the UNHCR’s environmental footprint, which improves “UNHCR’s environmental sustainability by reducing our greenhouse gas emissions and minimizing negative impacts on the environment” (UNHCR). This strategic framework for climate action, covers different problems that arise from the displacement of people, ensuring the safety of millions of people.

## Possible Solutions

The displacement of people due to natural disasters is one of the most concerning and unfortunate consequences of climate change. Because so little past action has been taken to address this issue, it is imperative that countries take action to prevent this issue from happening, or to protect the rights and well-being of those that suffer because of this issue. Possible solutions to this issue include the establishment of international laws regarding the protection of displaced persons due to climate change. Since there are no current international laws that regard disaster displacement, many climate migrants struggle in finding rescue, therefore, the

establishment of international laws that regard the protection of these people would diminish the number of climate refugees that are misplaced. Similarly, another solution would be to offer climate and environmental migrants the same privileges, rights, and protections that are given to refugees. This would mean that they could more easily apply for asylum and protection in asylum countries, as well as the right to enroll in refugee protection programs, thus decreasing the number of misplaced climate migrants.

Ensuring that protocols regarding natural disasters and the anticipation of such disasters are also paramount to halt this issue since it sets an action plan that should be followed in case of emergencies. Furthermore, the encouragement of actions that prevent the further development of climate change, such as control over carbon emissions, the usage of renewable energy, and more, should be a priority in order to avoid natural disasters.

### **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)**

This issue links to the “climate action” as this issue talks about the effect of climate change on civilians and how it is obligating people from different corners of the Earth to migrate to a new country. This link well as climate action calls upon taking action to combat climate change and its impacts. Environmental migration is one if its impacts.



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## Useful Links for Research

I. Country profile:

[https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our\\_focus/wildlife\\_practice/problems/illegal\\_trade/wildlife\\_trade\\_campaign/scorecard/](https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our_focus/wildlife_practice/problems/illegal_trade/wildlife_trade_campaign/scorecard/)

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country\\_profiles/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm)

<https://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/>

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

II. United Nations Environmental Program

<https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/three-ways-united-nations-environment-programme-works-address-illegal-trade>

III. Links that are useful for research for this topic:

<https://www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html>

<https://www.climate-refugees.org/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/23/magazine/climate-migration.html>

IV. Tips

A. Be sure to use official websites. Preferably websites from governmental offices, organizations and informatic data. If there is a non-official website used, be sure to research more about that website to further acknowledge how reliable the website is. Other delegates can question how reliable the information is.

B. Plagiarism is **not** allowed in PANAMUN. Try to cite all websites used and

quote certain speeches.

- C. Be sure to understand your country and understand how this issue impacts your delegation.
- D. Be sure to be up to date with the information regarding this issue as it is an issue that has seen a surge in its importance to our world!
- E. Take notes on whatever any delegate says, this could help the delegates be aware of who they can and should be working with!
- F. If it is your first time, don't be scared! All the chairs present are more than excited to help you guys out!