

1. WHY IS UNHCR INVOLVED?

The impact of climate change, which already challenges UNHCR's operations, adds to the scale and complexity of human mobility and displacement. It contributes to conflict and intensifies competition for scarce resources.

UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency and a leading humanitarian organisation, has long been given the responsibility to protect and assist refugees and stateless persons.

This role has evolved and today encompasses other groups of persons who have been forcibly displaced, including those displaced within their own countries (Internally Displaced Persons - IDPs).

The displaced and stateless constitute some of the world's most vulnerable people and they too will be affected by climate change. Not all will have the resources to manage or adapt and whether the change is slow (such as desertification) or sudden (such as natural disasters), the impact may be the cause of more displacement both within national borders and beyond.

This will add to the ongoing complex humanitarian challenge.



Chad/Sudanese refugees from Darfur, July 2004. UNHCR/H. Caux

2. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

The global number of refugees (including those outside of UNHCR's mandate) exceeds 15 million with another estimated 26 million IDPs who have fled various forms of persecution.

What will be of those who flee for environmental reasons for whom there is no specific legal framework and no one state responsible for the displacement? Will the solutions for those displaced by climate change include similar assistance and protection responses as for refugees and IDPs who have fled from persecution?

The increase in numbers alone could place unbearable pressure on the capacity of the international community to offer assistance and protection.

WHAT ABOUT 'CLIMATE REFUGEES'?

The phrase 'climate refugees' is a misnomer. 'Refugee' is a term of art in international law, referring to persons who flee from and/or cannot return to their countries because of a fear of persecution on specified grounds, or because of generalised violence. Among those people who are or will be displaced across borders as a result of, among other factors, climate change, there are and will be refugees - but a sizeable number may not meet the refugee definition.

While these persons may need some form of international protection, it would be wrong to identify them as 'refugees' or to equate their needs and status with those of refugees. To do so would only undermine the existing refugee regime and the existing legal definitions, to the detriment of *bona fide* refugees.

What will be of non-refugees, not meeting the current definition, who flee to another country or find themselves abroad when disaster strikes at home? Will they be allowed to stay until return becomes

feasible and if so, on what basis and with what rights? What of those from low-lying island States who may become stateless if their country literally disappears?

These are some of the key challenges climate change poses. The world now needs solutions.



Myanmar/UNHCR delivers aid to victims of Cyclone Nargis, May 2008. UNHCR/S. Kritsanavarin

3. WHAT IS UNHCR DOING TO HELP?

The UNHCR strategy comprises:

a) Operations Management

UNHCR has engaged with partners within the humanitarian community in order to integrate disaster risk reduction in country programmes, and is looking at creating a better synergy with relevant stakeholders in preparing for, and responding to emergencies (including natural disasters).

Offering assistance and protection to refugees and IDPs in urban as well as rural settings is a key priority. Climate change will increase the numbers of urban displaced and UNHCR is looking to work even more closely with Governments and other agencies in order to meet their needs.

Operations in the field are already functioning in accordance with Environmental Guidelines and UNHCR must continue to seek to increase usage of renewable energy sources and look for disaster-

resistant locations, minimizing impact on the environment. This is especially the case when operating in climate change 'hot spots' – areas particularly prone to the effects of climate change.



Chad/IDPs collecting firewood, February 2007. UNHCR/M. Beasdale

b) Protection Policy

UNHCR will seek to assist and protect all persons within its mandate, including the prevention and reduction of statelessness. Protection will also be afforded, through appropriate inter-agency frameworks, to persons not within the mandate but who need protection, such as IDPs fleeing natural disasters.

UNHCR is also keen to influence the necessary dialogue on new or enhanced modalities of international cooperation to develop the capacity of States to respond to the challenges of forced displacement in the context of climate change. National, regional and international legal frameworks may need to adapt to these newly arising challenges.

c) Advocacy

Advocating for the needs and rights of persons within UNHCR's mandate is an important part of its strategy. Submissions continue to be made to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to ensure climate-induced displacement is properly dealt with in the outcome document of the Copenhagen conference.

d) Partnerships

UNHCR is working with other UN agencies, members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and coordinating with the Secretary-General's Special Representative for the Human Rights of IDPs, to raise awareness about the humanitarian and human rights implications of climate change.

Further reading

More information on UNHCR and climate change, including the latest policy statement and texts of the UNFCCC submissions are available at: www.unhcr.org/climate.

UNHCR and CLIMATE CHANGE:

INVOLVEMENT, CHALLENGES & RESPONSE

PUBLISHED BY:

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UNHCR
The UN
Refugee Agency

