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Climate Change and Forced Migration
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The Climate Change Future is Now

I would like to thank the previous speakers for having underlined the importance of the Climate Change issue to the subject of international migration. UNHCR is seized of the climate change issue. We have been working on it for longer than you may think.

We must because though we often speak of this issue in terms of the future consequences of climate change the fact is **the future is now**. If you don't believe it, visit Darfur, Kenya, Southern Sudan to name but a few of the situations where climatic conditions are endangering the continuation of human life.

As Darfur itself shows Climate Change has its consequences in many forms. It can create displacement in its own right. It can be only one factor among many in a displacement situation. It can be the cause of societal strains or food shortages or disagreements over resource allocation that can lead to conflicts that generate displacement. So climate change has both its direct effects and secondary or tertiary effects all resulting in the forced displacement of people. And we are not talking about an issue that will begin to affect us in the future. As I said earlier, the future is now.

I come to this conference with two preoccupations. First, is a series of questions on the nature and magnitude of the problem. Second, is a question we are asking ourselves within UNHCR, namely what should we, UNHCR, as the international body with the core competencies best suited for dealing with forced displacement, what should we be doing about the problem, in terms of planning and in terms of proactive measures.

Let me digress by noting that nothing I say should take away from the importance we in UNHCR accord to the issue of prevention. It is the obligation of humanity to do everything possible to avert climate change and its negative effects on our world. And to paraphrase an old saying, billions of dollars of prevention is worth trillions of dollars of mitigation. But we must also be realistic. Our generation has failed to live up to its obligations on this issue and any steps we take now, however welcome, will not totally reverse the trends. There will be consequences due to climate change and we need to understand this and prepare.

So, what do we need to understand?

First, we need to try to get more precision on the magnitude of the forced displacement that climate change will induce. Given the primary, secondary and tertiary effects I have described, it is unlikely we will get as much precision as we would like. Current estimates seem to range between 250 million and a billion people who will be forcibly displaced by 2050.

Second, we need to understand who and where the most vulnerable people are. Forced displacement within countries presents situations that are qualitatively different from the forced displacement that would occur as a result of the disappearance of island states. Forced displacements caused by violent climate have an emergency character that requires a different kind of response than more gradual displacement caused by rising ocean levels. And, forced displacement caused by war and violence induced or abetted by climate change requires yet another form of response. To the extent that you, that we, can narrow the field of probabilities we will make planning easier. I do not have high hopes we can pin the future down, but we can probably do better than we have done so far.

If I take the low end of the prediction range at 250 million additional people to be forcibly displaced over the period between now and 2050, this means that we will be seeing displacement at the level of about 6 million a year during this time period. At UNHCR we manage about 10 million refugees and have partial management responsibility for another 20 million internally displaced people. We are talking here about quantum leaps in the numbers of people who will find themselves in the forced-displaced category.

My second set of issues relates to mitigation. Here too we have questions.

Who is going to care for these people?

Who is going to cover the costs?

Which are the countries that will accept those who must leave their home territories?

As of now the questions are unanswered but let me offer some thoughts.

First, UNHCR is a refugee agency with a clear mandate to protect and assist refugees and stateless persons. Some substantial percentage of the people who will be displaced will find themselves in this situation because they are escaping conflict or persecution brought on by civil strife caused in turn by climate change. Those who flee their country because the country no longer exists may well become stateless and therefore become charges of UNHCR. In all of these situations UNHCR has the mandate and responsibility to assume the responsibility to protect.

But UNHCR is called upon frequently to assist in international emergencies caused by natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods and violent storms, not because the people affected by these events fall under the UNHCR mandate but because UNHCR has the experience and capability to assist and has a humanitarian obligation in these situations to do what it can.

By extension, it is hard for me to envisage a true international emergency of forced displacement precipitated directly or indirectly by climate change in which UNHCR would not play a key role. So we have to be ready to assume our share of this responsibility. We will need to consider whether or not additional international legal frameworks are necessary to tackle the issues or whether existing mechanisms coupled with intense and careful coordination will suffice.

But I am not as concerned about the issue of legal mandates as I am about answering the other critical questions. For example, who is going to cover the costs?

It has been proposed that the costs should be borne by those who have caused the problem. And, although no country or group is free from blame on this issue, the industrialized countries of the world clearly bear the greater part of this burden. Personally, I like the idea that those who create the problem should bear the cost of fixing it but my experience leads me through a different route to the same result. I would argue that rather than assigning blame we achieve the same result by asking those who have the funds and the technologies to rise to the occasion and carry out their duty to humanity. Recent studies show that though the investment required may be large, the payback in economic terms can also be large. In sum, the developed countries of the world should be able to shoulder this burden if the will exists to do so.

If funding is available I am confident we can find the international mechanisms necessary to address the problem. But the funding availability will be problematic.

Another issue of concern is the question, who will accept these forced migrants when they can no longer live in their own countries? I am more concerned about finding the answer to this question than to the issue of funding. The climate on immigration in my country is not easy though the United States continues to receive large numbers of refugees. The political climate in Europe is worse and not getting better. We, in UNHCR, spend a lot of our time trying to find countries who will take refugees. On the basis of our experiences I would predict that dealing with the resettlement of those who have been forcibly displaced by climate change will be a formidable, and possibly insurmountable, task.

So to tell all of you what you already know. We are entering into a period in which our questions outnumber our answers, where the magnitude of the problem looks larger than the will to solve it. In this situation we need to mobilize the cognoscenti, governments and publics without, as has been stressed here earlier today, generating hysteria.

I can recall the day when I first saw the pictures from space of the planet earth. I mark this event as one of great historical importance, the first time humanity was brought to the reality that we lived, as one, on a single planet for which we were responsible. Climate Change is the first issue that we, as humanity, must address on a global scale and to do so we must tap into the awe and the dedication that was engendered by those first pictures from space. We are dealing with a problem impacting all of humanity and we need, in addressing it, to marshal a human response that is up to the measure of the challenge.