



Climate change, natural disasters and human displacement: a UNHCR perspective¹

“Although there is a growing awareness of the perils of climate change, its likely impact on human displacement and mobility has received too little attention.”²

António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

The process of climate change – and the multiple natural disasters it will engender – will in all certainty add to the scale and complexity of human mobility and displacement.³ Thus far the international community has focused primarily on the scientific aspects of climate change, with the aim of understanding the processes at play and mitigating the impact of human activity. Yet climate change is likely to pose humanitarian problems and challenges. As such it is of direct interest to humanitarian agencies⁴, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

¹ This policy paper updates and supercedes the paper issued by UNHCR in October 2008 and will be updated as necessary, in line with relevant developments within the climate change debate. Further UNHCR publications on climate change are available online at: www.unhcr.org/climate.

² *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2008, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080901faessay87506/antonio-guterres/millions-uprooted.html>.

³ The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f2770.html>) defines climate change as “a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to other natural climate variability that has been observed over comparable time periods”. Climate change is a process which is manifested in a number of ways, including: a rise in average temperatures, often referred to as ‘global warming’; changes in rainfall patterns leading to floods, droughts and, in some areas, desertification; extreme and unpredictable weather patterns leading to more numerous and intense natural disasters; and, the melting of glaciers and the polar ice-caps resulting in rising sea-levels and coastal erosion, rendering low-lying areas uninhabitable.

⁴ Several members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s Informal Task Force on Climate Change have produced papers detailing the humanitarian implications of climate change. These are available at: <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/pageloader.aspx?page=content-news-newsdetails&newsid=134>

UNHCR is a leading agency of the United Nations responsible for and possessing the expertise in the area of forced displacement. It is projected that climate change will over time trigger larger and more complex movements of population, both within and across borders, and has the potential to render some people stateless. Since climate change is certain to have a major impact on future patterns of human mobility, approaches which address environmental issues in isolation from other variables and processes will not be sufficient to solve the problem.

In tandem with deeper understanding of the scientific processes at play, UNHCR would encourage more reflection on the humanitarian and displacement challenges that climate change will generate. It is likely that most of the displacement provoked by climate change manifested, for example, through natural disasters, could remain internal in nature. Great strides have been made in developing the legal framework for the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁵ As part of United Nations humanitarian reform, a consensual division of labor for their assistance has also been established known as the Cluster Approach. It is likely that the multiplication of natural disaster scenarios will test the capacities of humanitarian actors, and may call for a new distribution of roles and/or new models of cooperation.

Some cross-border movement scenarios may be dealt with within the existing international refugee framework, which has proven to be flexible over the past decades, but others may require new approaches, premised upon new forms of inter-State cooperation, international solidarity and responsibility-sharing. Another angle requiring reflection is the phenomenon of statelessness.

This note contains UNHCR's preliminary perspectives on these questions as a contribution to the ongoing debate on climate change. In the interests of brevity, it does not present detailed empirical evidence relating to the issue of climate change, which can be found in successive reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).⁶

Instead, the following sections examine:

- (1) foreseeable displacement scenarios,
- (2) their implications for UNHCR,
- (3) terminology and the 1951 Refugee Convention,
- (4) suggestions for the way forward.

Information on UNHCR activities in relation to environmental conservation and the impact of climate change on UNHCR operations is included in the Annex.

⁵ See 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/idp/standards.htm>.

⁶ Available at: http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/publications_and_data_reports.htm

Displacement scenarios

While climate change has been the subject of intense debate and speculation within the scientific community, insufficient attention has been given to the humanitarian consequences it will generate. Just as the causes of climate change are being analyzed and its consequences projected, it is equally vital to anticipate foreseeable movement scenarios and strengthen the responses to the humanitarian consequences.

Climate change is already undermining the livelihoods and security of many people, exacerbating income differentials and deepening inequalities. Over the last two decades the number of recorded natural disasters has doubled from some 200 to over 400 per year. Nine out of every ten natural disasters today are climate-related.⁷ The Norwegian Refugee Council recently indicated that as many as 20 million people may have been displaced by climate-induced sudden-onset natural disasters in 2008 alone.⁸

As temperatures rise and land becomes less productive, the process of urbanization will accelerate, generating additional competition for scarce resources and public services in cities across the globe. The incidence of vector-borne diseases will also increase as a result of climate change, as will the cost of food and energy. Increased social tension and political conflict is thus likely, though it may remain difficult to trace the origins of such tensions to climate change.

Just as human movements which are induced or strongly influenced by the process of climate change will vary in character, so will a range of responses and, potentially, new approaches. As in the past, populations will implement adaptation strategies to avert or deal with displacement as a result of unpredictable disasters such as cyclones, floods and mudslides.

In regions affected by the longer-term consequences of climate change, people will also move in large numbers, but will do so over longer periods of time and in more diverse directions. Some will move to more hospitable areas in home countries while others will seek to leave their own country and enter other States. Since new forms and patterns of movement are emerging, the concepts traditionally used to categorize different types of movement are becoming increasingly blurred.⁹ New legal frameworks may need to be negotiated.

⁷ Sir John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, *Opening Remarks at the Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference and Exhibition "DIHAD 2008 Conference"*, 8 April 2008, available at: <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/YSAR-7DHL88?OpenDocument>.

⁸ Elverland, S., '20 million Climate Displaced in 2008', Norwegian Refugee Council, 8 June 2009, available at: <http://www.nrc.no/?did=9407544>.

⁹ See 'The Climate Change – Displacement Nexus', presented by Prof. Walter Kälin, Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Panel on disaster risk reduction and preparedness: addressing the humanitarian consequences of natural disasters, ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment, 16 July 2008, available at: http://www.brookings.edu/speeches/2008/0716_climate_change_kalin.aspx.

The Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Walter Kälin, has identified five climate change-related scenarios that may directly or indirectly cause human displacement. They provide a useful starting point for analyzing the character of displacement and assessing the protection and assistance needs of those affected:¹⁰

- hydro-meteorological disasters (flooding, hurricanes/typhoons/cyclones, mudslides, etc.);
- zones designated by Governments as being too high-risk and dangerous for human habitation;
- environmental degradation and slow onset disaster (e.g. reduction of water availability, desertification, recurrent flooding, salinization of coastal zones, etc.);
- the case of ‘sinking’ small island states; and,
- violent conflict triggered by a decrease in essential resources (e.g. water, land, food) owing to climate change.

In each of these scenarios, people may become displaced either within their own countries or across international borders. While the latter type of movement is less likely, at least in the initial phases of displacement, regard must also be had to the situation of migrants who find themselves outside their country of nationality as disaster strikes there, and are thus unable and/or unwilling to return home.

Where hydro-meteorological disasters or environmental degradation cause internal displacement, as States have primary responsibility for their citizens, national and local authorities have a vital role to play in responding to such scenarios. IDPs should receive protection and assistance in accordance with the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. As a result of recurring disasters, some States may exercise the sovereign obligation to protect their citizens by designating areas as high-risk zones, too dangerous for human habitation, owing to their location, for example, in flood-prone or landslide-prone areas. People may have to be forcibly evacuated and displaced from their lands, prohibited from returning to them, and relocated to safe areas. It is likely that the affected persons would qualify as IDPs and, once again, be protected by the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The most likely durable solutions would be integration in the places of displacement or relocation to new areas inside the country, since return will normally not be possible.

Where people affected by such disasters cross an international border, for example because the only escape routes lead them there, they would not normally qualify as refugees who are entitled to international protection within the existing international

¹⁰ Kälin, *op cit.*

refugee framework, nor would they necessarily be classified as migrants. While benefiting from the applicability of human rights norms, “their status remains unclear.”¹¹

Determining whether cross-border movements are forced or voluntary may not be practicable in the vast majority of cases, but this is not the most relevant element under international law. The crux of the issue will be whether persons have a need for international protection; and, if so, on what grounds this need may be turned into an entitlement.

Another challenge will be posed to low-lying small island States by rising sea levels. The phenomenon may prompt internal relocation as well as migration abroad, until such time as the territory is no longer able to sustain human life. As in the previous scenario, prevailing international refugee law would not automatically apply. The question of statelessness is, however, more directly implicated.¹²

With the disappearance of territory, one of the key constituting elements of statehood, it is not clear that these States would continue to exist as such. The same would apply if the territory would be uninhabitable to such an extent that the entire population and the Government would be forced to relocate to other States. In the event that statehood is deemed to have ceased in such a scenario, the populations concerned would be left stateless unless they acquired other nationalities.

Even where the States continued to exist in legal terms and their Governments attempted to function from the territory of other States, it is unclear that they would be able to ensure the rights which flow from citizenship. If they were unable to ensure such basic rights as the right to return to one’s own country or to obtain a passport, statelessness considerations would also arise. In view of the fact that statelessness has not yet arisen, however, the international law principle of prevention of statelessness would be applicable.

The fifth and final scenario of human displacement is a decrease in vital resources (water, land, food production) attributable to climate change, which triggers armed conflict and violence. Regardless of the underlying causes, those displaced by armed conflict inside their country are IDPs in the sense of the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Those fleeing to other countries could qualify as refugees or be afforded

¹¹ Kälin, *op cit*.

¹² An analysis of the legal aspects of forced displacement occurring in the context of climate change has recently been submitted by UNHCR to the 6th session of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action (AWG-LCA 6) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); an additional submission was made on the subject of climate change and statelessness. The AWG-LCA met in June 2009 in Bonn, for talks which represented an important opportunity for States Parties to the UNFCCC to negotiate on a draft text in the run up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, 7–18 December 2009. Both UNHCR submission papers to the UNFCCC are available on UNHCR’s climate change web page at: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search/?page=&comid=4a2d26df6&cid=49aea9390&keywords=UNFCCC>.

protection under regional refugee law instruments¹³ or ‘complementary forms of protection’ under the relevant international law instruments or under the national law of receiving States.¹⁴

Persons who find themselves abroad when a natural disaster affects their home country will need protection against forcible return – for a shorter or longer period of time, depending on the circumstances. There may be instances in which the disaster-affected State itself seeks this form of relief on behalf of its citizens abroad. However, there may also be instances where the home State is simply unable to advocate for the protection needs of its own citizens due to the very nature of the disaster.

Implications for UNHCR

It is clear from the above analysis that some movements likely to be prompted by climate change could indeed fall within the traditional refugee law framework, bringing them within the ambit of international or regional refugee instruments, or complementary forms of protection, as well as within UNHCR’s mandate.¹⁵

The most obvious example is that of refugee movements provoked by armed conflict rooted in environmental factors. Such conflicts and displacements have occurred in a number of settings. Already today, some commentators have argued that conflict over energy sources, fertile land and fresh water are among the factors fuelling the crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan.¹⁶ Climate-related issues are projected to become an even more direct and common driver of conflicts. Should more conflicts of this nature manifest themselves in future, the demand for protection and assistance under the refugee framework will grow. This will, in turn, place a potentially unbearable strain on current standards and practices. One significant problem with the existing framework already exists in the context of persons fleeing indiscriminate violence, where the regime is both

¹³ See for example the broader definitions of ‘refugee’ contained in the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa 1969, at Article 1 (2), available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b36018.html>, and the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees 1984, at conclusion 3, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b36ec.html>.

¹⁴ The rights under the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), for example, apply not just to citizens, but to all persons within the jurisdiction of the State, including refugees, asylum-seekers and ‘illegal’ migrants. See General Comment No. 3 on the nature of States Parties’ obligations, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4538838e10.html>. The EU ‘Qualification Directive’ (Council Directive 2004/83/EC, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4157e75e4.htm>) widens the European protection regime to encompass certain persons not classified as refugees, but nonetheless in need of international protection.

¹⁵ In addition to the 1951 Refugee Convention definition, the mandate includes: victims of manmade disasters and persons of concern to the High Commissioner. See ECOSOC Resolution 2011 (LXI) of 2 August 1976, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae69ef418.html>, General Assembly Resolution 31/35 of 30 November 1976, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f0375c.html>, and General Assembly Resolution 48/118 of 20 December 1993, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f2641c.html>.

¹⁶ Boano, C., Zetter, R. and Morris, T. *Environmentally displaced people: Understanding the linkages between environmental change, livelihoods and forced migration*, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, November 2008, available at <http://repository.forcedmigration.org/pdf/?pid=fmo:4960>.

fragile and prone to be inconsistently applied. An analysis of this particular aspect of the protection regime, and a search for ways to strengthen it, will therefore feature in UNHCR's climate change strategy.

There may also be situations where the victims of natural disasters flee from their homeland because their Government has consciously withheld or obstructed assistance in order to punish or marginalize them on one of the five grounds set out in the refugee definition. In such scenarios, the persons concerned could legitimately be refugees in the traditional sense of the term.

A second scenario with implications for UNHCR relates to the potentially most dramatic manifestation of climate change, that of the 'sinking island' scenario, whereby the inhabitants of island states such as the Maldives and Tuvalu may eventually be obliged to leave their own country as a result of rising sea levels and the flooding of low-lying areas. Some form of UNHCR role regarding those obliged to seek safety abroad may be called for, certainly inasmuch as statelessness would be a concern.

UNHCR's role with conflict-induced internal displacement would be triggered as a result of the Cluster Approach. Under the division of labor introduced by the Cluster Approach, UNHCR has assumed global leadership of the Protection Cluster¹⁷, and co-leads the global Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster¹⁸ (CCCM) with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Emergency Shelter Cluster¹⁹ with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

UNHCR's involvement with people who have been displaced within their own country as a result of natural disasters has traditionally been determined on a case-by-case basis. Generally speaking, when UNHCR had an established presence and programme in a country that was struck by such a disaster, the Office offered its support to the authorities as a sign of solidarity and as a contribution to broader international and UN relief efforts. However, the Cluster Approach is also relevant in natural disaster scenarios, since it has been agreed that, at country level, the leadership role for protection in natural disaster situations is decided upon by UNHCR, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNICEF, on a case-by-case basis. This formula has, however, come under criticism from, among others, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, as it does not bring about the necessary predictability or rapidity of response. All three protection agencies concerned, including UNHCR, are currently engaged in a thorough review of this arrangement.

Any new approach must be rights-based, since experience during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and other recent disasters have confirmed that such emergencies generate new threats to the human rights of affected populations. In terms of preventing and responding to such threats, UNHCR considers the Inter Agency Standing Committee Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons Affected by Natural Disasters and the related

¹⁷ See <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=79>.

¹⁸ See <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=672>.

¹⁹ See <http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=77>.

Pilot Manual to be particularly valuable resources to address the special needs and vulnerabilities of persons forcibly displaced by the effects of natural disasters.²⁰

Even where UNHCR's mandate is clear and uncontested, such as in longstanding refugee situations, climate change will affect the delivery of operations, in view of its implications in the areas of water, sanitation, agriculture, environmental protection and health.²¹ The risk of flood water contaminating fresh water supplies, for example, will add another layer of complexity to the task of providing clean water and minimizing the spread of disease. For information on how environmental factors, including climate change, have impacted on, and are addressed by, UNHCR at the operational level please refer to the Annex.

In order to respond to these challenges, there is likely to be an increasing dependency on pre-existing partnerships with climate change-affected countries and a need to strengthen, where possible, dialogues between relevant Governments and UNHCR. Improving relationships with Governments and partner organizations will feature prominently in UNHCR's efforts to minimize and adapt to the impacts of climate change in refugee, returnee and IDP operations.

Terminology and the 1951 UN Refugee Convention

In recent times, a growing number of organizations and commentators have employed the notion of 'environmental refugees' or 'climate refugees,' a concept used to refer to people who are obliged to leave their usual place of residence as a result of long-term climate change or sudden natural disasters. UNHCR has serious reservations with respect to the terminology and notion of environmental refugees or climate refugees. These terms have no basis in international refugee law.

The phrase 'refugee' is a legal term. A person who has been determined a refugee will have satisfied the criteria under the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1969 OAU Convention, or UNHCR's mandate. For this reason, just as a reference to an 'economic refugee' is not a reference to a recognized term under international law, neither are 'climate refugee' nor 'environmental refugee'. While often used, particularly in the media, it would be incorrect to give the words a legal meaning that has not been endorsed by the legal community.

²⁰ IASC Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Persons Affected by Natural Disasters and the related Pilot Manual, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, March 2008, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49a2b8f72.html>.

²¹ See, for example, the UNFCCC submission paper 'Protecting the health of vulnerable people from the humanitarian consequences of climate change and climate related disasters', submitted to the 6th session of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action, 1-12 June 2009, by the World Health Organization in collaboration with UNHCR and other agencies, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a2d189e1a.html>. See also: 'Climate Change and AIDS: A Joint Working Paper', UNEP and UNAIDS, June 2009, available at http://data.unaids.org/pub/BaseDocument/2008/20081223_unep_unaids_joint_working_paper_on_cca_en.pdf.

UNHCR is actually of the opinion that the use of such terminology could potentially undermine the international legal regime for the protection of refugees whose rights and obligations are quite clearly defined and understood. It would also not be helpful to appear to imply a link and thus create confusion regarding the impact of climate change, environmental degradation and migration and persecution that is at the root of a refugee fleeing a country of origin and seeking international protection. While environmental factors can contribute to prompting cross-border movements, they are not grounds, in and of themselves, for the grant of refugee status under international refugee law. However, UNHCR does recognise that there are indeed certain groups of migrants, currently falling outside of the scope of international protection, who are in need of humanitarian and/or other forms of assistance.²²

Some states and NGOs have suggested that the 1951 Refugee Convention should simply be amended and expressly extended to include people who have been displaced across borders as a result of long-term climate change or sudden natural disasters. UNHCR considers that any initiative to modify this definition would risk a renegotiation of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which, would not be justified by actual needs. Moreover, in the current political environment, it could result in a lowering of protection standards for refugees and even undermine the international refugee protection regime altogether.

The way ahead

The United Nations Secretary-General has committed the UN system to be responsive to the evolution of the inter-governmental discussions on climate change, while at the same time offering proactive leadership in key emerging areas.²³ Addressing the humanitarian consequences is an obvious priority.

The world is currently confronted with an accumulation of negative trends: climate change, an increased incidence of natural disasters, rising food and energy prices, as well as turbulence in financial markets and a global economic slump. While it is impossible to predict the exact outcome of these phenomena, it is evident that they create the conditions in which significant numbers of people may be displaced or feel obliged to migrate. In responding to these circumstances, and for the reasons discussed above, the Office would encourage the international community to adopt an approach based on respect for human rights and international cooperation.²⁴ This is particularly important in the context of the international protection regime, as it may take some time to reach agreement on the

²² Mixed migration and associated gaps in the international protection regime featured prominently within the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, held on 11 and 12 December 2007, The Chairman's summary of the dialogue is available at the following link: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/479744c42.html>.

²³ The Secretary-General will host a Climate Change Summit in New York on 22 September 2009 as part of a strategy to assist countries with their negotiations in the run up to the UNFCCC in Copenhagen, to be held on 7–18 December 2009.

²⁴ See report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the relationship between climate change and human rights, 15 January 2009 (document A/HRC/10/61, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/498811532.html>), which contains a useful analysis of the issue of international legal obligations and inter-State cooperation in the context of climate change.

appropriate way forward, but this should not prevent States from recognizing their existing obligations under international law.

Understanding the issues

Climate change is not just a scientific issue. More work is needed to analyze the likely human displacement scenarios which climate change will cause, and to identify and fill any legal and operational gaps. It will also be necessary to assess the potential consequences of climate change on populations who are already of concern to UNHCR and to support appropriate preparedness, adaptation and coping mechanisms.

There is presently an increasing amount of analysis of the relationship between climate change, environmental degradation, armed conflict, displacement and migration, but there is a pressing need for accurate empirical data to be collected and aggregated in order to keep the legal aspects of the impacts of climate change in line with the effects which are already being felt in operations at the field level. Common understandings need to be developed in relation to these issues. The use of innovative technology will play a central part in environmental protection. Significant progress on the mapping of certain hot spots has already been made,²⁵ additional knowledge is also required with respect to the environmental hot spots where displacement is most likely to be a feature; the coping mechanisms (including migration) employed by people who are most adversely affected by climate change; and the extent and ways in which environmental degradation is acting as a driver of social and political conflict.

Prevention, mitigation and adaptation

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change provides an important means of pursuing and attaining the objective of combating the root causes of climate change, in particular greenhouse gas emissions. It is undisputed, however, that the devastating consequences of climate change cannot be reversed in the short term – this is why long-term cooperative action within the UNFCCC framework is concerned with both mitigation (“avoiding the unmanageable”) and adaptation (“managing the unavoidable”).

Migration is often the survival strategy employed by populations whose human security is threatened. UNHCR is convinced that additional international funding will not only be needed to help States mitigate the impact of climate change, but also to bolster adaptation, disaster preparedness and risk reduction, and humanitarian response at the national level. To avoid situations where people are compelled to migrate or become displaced, the resilience of communities must be better understood and reinforced, both in terms of their physical security and their ability to sustain adequate livelihoods.

²⁵ For example, the United Nations University (in collaboration with CARE International and UNHCR) recently presented a side event at the June 2009 Bonn Climate Change Talks entitled ‘In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change’.

It is evident that prevention and adaptation activities at the local level should be supported by both the affected States and the broader international community, including relevant components of the UN system and the international financial institutions. UNHCR will assist Governments, where possible, with the implementation of their National Adaptation Programmes of Action, but inter-State cooperation will lie at the heart of effective mitigation and adaptation planning, which will have to be closely linked to development. All UNHCR staff involved at the country level with refugee and IDP settlements, both rural and urban, will need to be equipped with strategies to combat and cope with the effects of climate change, impacting not just on persons of concern to UNHCR but also the broader host communities. Within the context of the United Nations Development Group, UNHCR has assisted in developing guidance to UN country teams on environmental sustainability and disaster risk reduction strategies.²⁶

Moving forward: key work sites for UNHCR

UNHCR's overarching policy to tackle the effects of climate change will be reflected in three distinct areas: operations management; protection strategies; and advocacy.

There are already some emerging issues within operations management, to which the Office has become more responsive and sensitive. One such issue is that of UNHCR's ability to offer assistance and protection in urban environments. The increase in urban populations as a result of climate change-induced migration will contribute to the 'urban heat island effect'²⁷ and will therefore lead to increases in temperatures in addition to those brought about by climate change. This will make people particularly vulnerable to health risks and will make the delivery of assistance and protection by UNHCR especially important. Work by the Office on this aspect of climate change will dovetail with UNHCR's broader urban policy work.

The need to look closely at the treatment of persons fleeing armed conflict or indiscriminate violence, sometimes called 'war refugees', will become an issue of increasing importance if predictions of climate change leading to armed conflict materialize. The current regime, which is inconsistently applied by States, places a heavy reliance on subsidiary protection, due in part to the fact that the collective threat faced by persons involved in armed conflict makes the classification of individuals as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention difficult. The net result is that persons fleeing armed conflict are often afforded less protection than Convention refugees. Reviewing the legal mechanics of this element of the protection regime and advocating for an appropriate strengthening of the regime, in appropriate fora, will feature as a component of UNHCR's wider policy on climate change.

²⁶ See UNDG Working Group on Programming Issues, *Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction into the Common Country Assessment and United Nations Development Assistance Framework*, April 2009, available at http://www.undg.org/docs/9866/UNDG-DRR-Guidance-Note-2009_DUP_08-07-2009_11-43-02-734_AM.PDF.

²⁷ See 'Protecting the health of vulnerable people from the humanitarian consequences of climate change and climate related disasters', World Health Organization (in collaboration with UNHCR), above at footnote 21.

UNHCR considers advocacy as an important tool in ensuring the realization of the protection needs of persons of concern falling within its mandate. While 2009 is a critical year in negotiating a more effective response to the challenge of climate change, the outcome of the UNFCCC Conference in Copenhagen ('COP 15') in December 2009 needs to be awaited. But 'climate change' will not be solved completely even by the best of outcomes, and genuine progress may or may not be achieved. Much will indeed depend on whether human displacement and humanitarian aspects of climate change, and the protection needs of persons of concern to UNHCR, will be properly referenced as issues that the international community must factor in. UNHCR believes that the need for advocacy on climate change issues will remain in various fora into 2010 and beyond.

For more information on climate change and ways in which UNHCR is involved with this issue, please visit www.unhcr.org/climate.

UNHCR
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Annex

UNHCR, environmental conservation, and the impact of climate change on UNHCR operations

UNHCR has been actively engaged with environmental conservation issues in the context of operations for refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) for more than a decade. The Office has long recognized that the presence of refugees and IDPs can have a damaging impact on the environment,²⁸ especially in situations where those populations are large in size and are concentrated in confined and ecologically fragile areas.²⁹ The most common manifestations of this problem include deforestation, diminishing water supplies and the disappearance of wild food resources.

Over the years, UNHCR has introduced activities and programmes aimed at mitigating the environmental impact of refugee and IDP populations and promoting adaptation to resource-scarce environments. To meet these objectives, UNHCR has produced a set of Environmental Guidelines which are based on four key principles: prevention, participation, integration and cost-effectiveness.³⁰

At the operational level, UNHCR recognizes the need to ensure that operations are as environmentally sustainable as possible, while remaining within certain cost-effective parameters. Efforts are made to actively seek environmentally-friendly sources of fuel for cooking and heating, and UNHCR has undertaken tests using peat moss, rice husks, biogas and solar energy. The promotion of environmentally-friendly shelter-construction practices is another UNHCR priority, and in this respect, the Office has encouraged the use of sun-dried mud bricks and reusable roofing components.

In a number of African countries that are confronted with the problem of deforestation, including Chad, Ethiopia, Namibia and Sudan, UNHCR is collaborating with the Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources (SAFIRE) to promote sustainable forms of agriculture in refugee camps that are confronted with the problem of deforestation.

Formal and informal environmental education and awareness-raising projects are now incorporated in many UNHCR programmes. To ensure that such activities are undertaken in a systematic manner, UNHCR requires all of its Branch Offices to confirm that their Country Operations Plans and emergency contingency plans incorporate sound environmental management practices.

²⁸ The environmental impact of hosting refugees, IDPs and returnees has featured as a key decision of the Standing Committee of UNHCR in 2009.

²⁹ For an example of UNHCR's early interest in this issue, see 'Environmentally induced displacement and environmental impacts resulting from mass migrations', Report of an International Symposium Organized by UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration and the Refugee Policy Group, Geneva, 21-24 April 1996, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a54bbd6d.html>.

³⁰ The Environmental Guidelines, introduced in August 2005, are available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a54bbd10.html>.

Such activities serve a number of important purposes. In addition to conserving the environment and mitigating the process of climate change, they encourage States to respect the institution of asylum and help to reduce the potential for conflict between refugee or IDP populations and local communities. In these respects, UNHCR's environmental activities constitute an important tool of protection.

Beyond becoming a more prominent driver of population movements, some of the manifestations of climate change – such as flooding, water scarcity and food insecurity – are already affecting UNHCR operations for refugees, returnees and IDPs. For example, flooding in Somali refugee camps in north-eastern Kenya in November 2007 led 12,000 refugees to lose their shelters and prompted the displacement of some 80,000 refugees to safer locations. Dadaab in Kenya is another case in point: severe flooding in 2006 left two people dead and 78,000 uprooted, and seriously disrupted UNHCR's operations.³¹

The secondary impacts were equally devastating: an outbreak of malaria and diarrhea, affecting mainly women and children; reallocation of resources earmarked for new arrivals diverted to assist the flood-affected refugees; the need to airlift food assistance, dramatically increasing transport costs; and temporary suspension of the supply of firewood, leading to generalized difficulties for refugees to prepare food.

Lack of rainfall is also affecting the availability of firewood and regeneration of vegetation in refugee-hosting areas, prompting travel as far as 60km from camps to collect firewood.

In 2008, refugees and IDPs in Chad, Ghana, Liberia and Sudan have seen their food rations reduced owing to increased food and fuel prices. Food shortages are also heightening security concerns. The World Food Programme reported that in Sudan alone more than 60 food trucks have been hijacked since the beginning of 2008.

Some of these examples demonstrate the impact that climate change is already having on refugee, returnee and IDP populations. UNHCR will need to more routinely factor in vulnerability to climate change as an additional consideration when assessing the needs of populations of concern. Climate change will also require the Office to work with Governments in implementing disaster risk reduction strategies, while continuing to promote adaptation strategies in its operations.

³¹ For more information on the operational difficulties experienced by UNHCR as a consequence of climate change, please see the recent presentation delivered by Jean-Francois Durieux, Deputy Director, Division of Operational Services, at the April 2009 Climate Change Talks in Bonn, entitled 'Climate Change and Forced Migration Hotspots: From Humanitarian Response to Area-wide Adaptation', available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4a1e4e342.html>.