Topic 2: Mitigating the Impact of Climate Induced Displacement

United Nations High Commission for Refugees

I. Introduction

Climate-induced displacement refers to the forced movement of people due to the adverse effects of climate change. These displacements are typically caused by environmental changes such as rising sea levels, increased frequency of extreme weather events, desertification, and lack of food or water.

Unlike traditional refugee movements, which are often driven by conflict, persecution, or violence, climate-induced displacement stems from environmental degradation, often slow and cumulative. Furthermore, under current international law, climate-displaced people do not meet the legal definition of "refugee" under the 1951 Refugee Convention, making them ineligible for the protections granted to refugees.

The scale and urgency of this issue is becoming increasingly evident. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), more than 30 million people may be displaced in 2025 due to climate-related events. This figure is expected to rise sharply in the coming years and decades, particularly as slow-onset processes like sea-level rise worsen.

Despite the growing threat, significant legal gaps remain in how the international community defines, protects, and assists those displaced by climate change. There is no binding international framework that specifically addresses climate-induced displacement, creating challenges for global cooperation and humanitarian assistance.

II. Key Terms

Climate-Induced Displacement: The movement of individuals or communities primarily due to climate-related events or conditions, including both sudden-onset disasters and slow-onset environmental changes.

Slow-Onset Events: Gradual environmental processes such as desertification, sea-level rise, and temperature increase that contribute to long-term displacement.

Sudden-Onset Events: Rapid natural disasters including hurricanes, floods, and wildfires that lead to immediate displacement.

Environmental Migrant: A person who is forced to leave their home region due to sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their livelihood or well-being.

Climate Refugee: A non-legally recognised term referring to an individual displaced specifically by climate-related events. Unlike political refugees, they lack formal protection under international law.

Internally Displaced Person (IDP): Someone forced to flee their home but who remains within their country's borders. Many climate-displaced people fall under this category.

Non-Refoulment: A principle of international law prohibiting the return of individuals to a country where they face serious threats to life or freedom. Its application to climate migrants is currently debated.

Loss and Damage: A concept in international climate negotiations referring to irreversible impacts of climate change, including displacement, that cannot be prevented through mitigation or adaptation alone.

III. Past International Actions

Task Force on Displacement (under the Warsaw International Mechanism (2013)): Established under the Paris Agreement (2016) to address displacement linked to climate change.
Kampala Convention (2009): African Union treaty addressing internal displacement, including environmental causes.

Cartagena Declaration (1984): A non-binding document for the protection of refugees in central and south America and can be extended to those affected by climate induced migration.

UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992): Set foundational climate change commitments, however, without explicit reference to migration and displacement.

Cancun Agreements (COP16, 2010): Official recognition of climate-induced displacement as a policy concern under UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) frameworks.

Paris Agreement (2015): Established the Task Force on Displacement under the Warsaw International Mechanism focusing on climate-related displacement issues.

New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016): Global agreement acknowledging climate change as a root cause of displacement.

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018): First international agreement explicitly recognising climate change as a migration driver, promoting flexible migration pathways.

COP27 “Loss and Damage” Fund (2022): Agreed to assist vulnerable countries in addressing climate disasters and associated displacement.

IV. Timeline of Key Events

2014/2015 - Protests broke in response to hyperinflation, lack of basic needs and the destabilization of Venezuela's economy and political system. This caused the crisis to intensify leading to the number of migrants to increase. In the short period of 4 months (August to December) 1 million refugees left the country.

2018 - The crisis reached one of the most critical stages, the daily average of people fleeing was around 5,500. Among them, many young women travelling alone with no resources at all.
During this period the figure of up to 3.5 million refugees were recorded.

2019 - Brazil insists on the Cartagena Declaration recognition as refugees for those forced migrants. Once it was officially approved (July 24th 2019) the first 174 Venezuelans got recognised as refugees.
By December 6th, already 21,000 Venezuelans had been given the protection and availability to rights as the state of refugees

2020 - Returns to Venezuela started to be recorded (300,000). UNHCR claims the motivation for return is due to the improvements on certain economic areas back in Venezuela, as well as the difficulties found by the people with the integration and tolerance in the foreign countries.

2023 - Nearly 8 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela, overpassing the figures both from Syria and the Ukraine's crisis.

Early 2025 - More than half of Spain's asylum applications were Venezuela (59%), unlike the past year with 38% of Spain's asylum seekers being Venezuelan. This demonstrates how the amount of Venezuelan refugees choosing Spain as a safe place is increasing.

V. Current Situation

Climate-induced displacement now affects over 120 million people globally, with internal displacement representing roughly 70% of cases. The impacts are most severe in vulnerable regions such as low-lying coastal areas, arid, “dry” zones, and disaster-prone countries like Bangladesh, the Maldives, and the Sahel region. Projections for the coming years show that an additional 6.7 million people are expected to be displaced globally by the end of 2026, driven by climate-induced disasters and ecological degradation, with the largest numbers forecasted in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Despite some recognition at international level, displaced populations lack adequate legal protection and funding, estimated at only about 10% of the $300 billion needed yearly for adaptation in developing countries, remain critically insufficient.

Recent data show that slow-onset disasters, such as sea-level rise and desertification, will lead to up to 216 million internally displaced migrants by 2050 if global warming continues unaddressed. Sea-level rise is already forcing millions from coastal cities and small island nations; for example, Bangladesh and the Pacific Islands face existential threats as whole communities risk becoming climate refugees. Desertification, especially in the Sahel, Central Asia, and Central America, results in falling agricultural productivity and rising food insecurity, further exacerbating large-scale regional migration. In 2025 alone, Afghanistan, DR Congo, Myanmar, and Syria are forecasted to see over 250,000 new displacements each due to the combined effects of climate and conflict. Extreme weather events, such as floods, hurricanes, and wildfires, remain deadly. From 1993 to 2022, over 765,000 people died in climate-related disasters, with direct losses amounting to a total of $4.2 trillion. For instance, the catastrophic hurricane Katrina, in 2005, amounted to nearly 1,900 deaths and the heatwaves in Europe in 2025 have led to around 2,300 heat-related deaths in major cities in just one summer, illustrating the intensifying risks and scale.

Funding for climate adaptation and displacement solutions lags far behind the needs. In 2025, global efforts mobilised only $13 million from new pledges, despite having a pipeline of nearly $600 million in unfunded projects and far greater demand for loss and damage compensation. International bodies have called for at least $1.3 trillion annually in climate action spending by 2035 and for tripling current adaptation outflows to around $400 million per year, however actual support is far short of demands, leaving millions exposed to further risk. As cross-border migration strains international systems and internal displacement puts pressure on urban infrastructure, the need for binding protection frameworks, sustainable displacement programs and robust compensation mechanisms is as urgent as ever.

VI. Major Parties Involved

Bangladesh: Severely affected by flooding and sea-level rise, Bangladesh faces the displacement of millions, particularly in coastal zones inundated by cyclones and saline intrusion. These disruptions impact agriculture, food security, and livelihoods, forcing many families to migrate abroad. While Bangladesh has developed adaptation plans, shelters, and resilient farming methods, the scale of displacement continues to overwhelm local capacity. This makes international financial and technical aid crucial, as unchecked migration could strain urban centers and generate pressures in other neighbouring countries.

Pacific Island States (Kiribati, Tuvalu, Vanuatu): For these states, rising sea levels are an existential threat affecting entire communities and cultures. The risk is not only physical, with homes and infrastructure lost, but also cultural, as ancestral lands and traditions tied to specific territories may disappear. By purchasing land abroad, as Kiribati has done in Fiji, they pursue a "migration-with-dignity" strategy to safeguard their sovereignty and avoid becoming a stateless people. At a global level, they advocate for stronger protection frameworks because their survival highlights the urgent humanitarian and legal gaps in current international law.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Desertification, drought, and recurrent food insecurity displaces millions, especially in the Sahel. This has immediate humanitarian consequences but also long-term political repercussions: migration pressures strain already fragile states, exacerbate conflicts over scarce resources such as water and arable land, and fuel insecurity that can spill across borders. The Kampala Convention is significant because it explicitly recognizes environmental displacement, setting a precedent in regional protection and policy. However, adaptation challenges remain vast, as agricultural economies struggle to realign livelihoods under changing climate conditions.

Honduras and Central America: Droughts and extreme weather events have undermined subsistence farming, eroding rural economies and driving people out of the "dry corridor." This migration is often directed toward North America, creating social and political challenges throughout the region. The loss of agricultural productivity not only increases poverty but also weakens social stability, contributing to cycles of displacement, unemployment, and insecurity. Regional coalitions play a critical role in balancing short-term relief, such as food aid and disaster response, while also undertaking longer-term adaptation projects to prevent forced migration from becoming regular.

India and China: These two nations face frequent floods, heatwaves, and typhoons that displace millions. The impacts are especially severe given their dense urban populations and agricultural reliance. Both states have advanced adaptation and disaster management systems, which help reduce casualties and speed recovery, but socioeconomic inequalities mean vulnerable groups, like rural farmers or the urban poor, still face disproportionate risks. Their large size and resources also make their adaptation strategies influential beyond their borders: through South-South cooperation, India and China share technologies and best practices with other developing nations, amplifying their global role in managing climate migration.

European Union (EU): The EU is not as directly threatened by climate-induced displacement within its borders, but it faces growing indirect impacts, primarily through increased migration from affected regions.

This has political and social implications for EU states, which wrestle with migration management and humanitarian obligations. To address the root causes, the EU funds adaptation, development, and humanitarian projects abroad, while also advocating for stronger international frameworks. Its policy choices influence the extent of climate resilience in vulnerable regions and the international willingness to recognise climate migrants as needing protection equally as much as those displaced by other causes.

United States of America (USA): The U.S. plays a decisive role as both a donor and a host country. Internationally, it provides humanitarian aid, funding, and technical support for disaster relief. Domestically, it faces climate impacts along its coasts and wildfire zones, which test its own resilience mechanisms. The issue is politically significant because climate migration pressures shape U.S. foreign policy toward Central America and the Pacific, while also entering debates on border management and humanitarian protection. Its level of engagement often signals global priorities, meaning U.S. leadership has compounding effects on international responses to climate-driven displacement.

VII. Key topics to Debate

- Should the 1951 Refugee Convention be amended or reinterpreted to include those displaced by climate change?
- Should the international community prioritise keeping people in place through adaptation, or prepare for inevitable large-scale relocation where survival is no longer possible?
- How should financial mechanisms for “loss and damage” compensate countries and communities facing irreversible harms such as forced migration and land loss?
- Should “climate-displaced persons” be granted a formal legal status under international law, and what obligations would this create for receiving states?
- How can governments and international organisations mitigate the security risks posed by climate-driven migration, such as resource competition and regional instability?

- What strategies can ensure that cities receiving large numbers of climate migrants expand housing, infrastructure, and services to support integration and prevent instability?

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