

HUMANITARIAN AID AND REFUGEES SYNOPSIS PRAMUN 2026

Topic I:

Recognition of climate-induced displacement and the status of climate refugees under international law.

I. Background:

Under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin [due to] a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” This definition has been maintained in international law since, and as such any persons displaced or forced out of their homes as a result of natural disasters or other weather events are not recognized as refugees. Without recognition in international law, climate refugees are not entitled to a lot of the same immunities as the 1951 definition, including: the ability to seek asylum, avoiding criminal charges regarding illegal immigration, or safety from being returned to home. So, displaced persons as a result of climate-related disasters have no protection under international law and countries are not obligated to provide asylum.

Climate refugees are often forced into migration as a result of extreme weather conditions in their region, often which are caused by climate change. Some of these events include drought, floods, cyclones, increased temperatures, desertification, and rising sea levels. This, on top of the lack of necessary resources (like water and food), contributes to areas being inhabitable or dangerous. In 2023, 56% of the 47 million internally displaced people were displaced as a result of climate-related disasters. This number is projected to increase more over time. In fact, the Australian Institute for Economic and Peace predicts at least 1.2 billion people could be displaced by climate-related events by the year 2050.

These disasters are increasing as time goes on, and are often considered a factor that increases the severity of persecution-related conflicts as the countries that undergo persecution and violence are not well-equipped to handle the impacts of climate change.

II. Past UN Action:

In the 2015 Paris Agreement, the United Nations attempted to create policies that would lessen the risks and effects of climate change. The introduction discusses migration and displacement as a result of climate change, and later states a need to “consider approaches that avert, minimize and address displacement” as it relates to climate change. This treaty worked towards preventing climate change and helping those directly affected by it, however it failed to have climate refugees or climate displacement formally recognized under international law.

Furthermore, on December 19, 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that aimed to create a global foundation for a safe and orderly migration system (titled the “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration”). In this resolution, climate change is recognized as a factor that drives people away from their homes. In connection with the Paris Agreement, this document recognizes climate

change and harsh weather conditions as a reason people flee from their homes, but does not provide any legal foundation that obligates nations to assist those affected.

III. Bloc Positions:

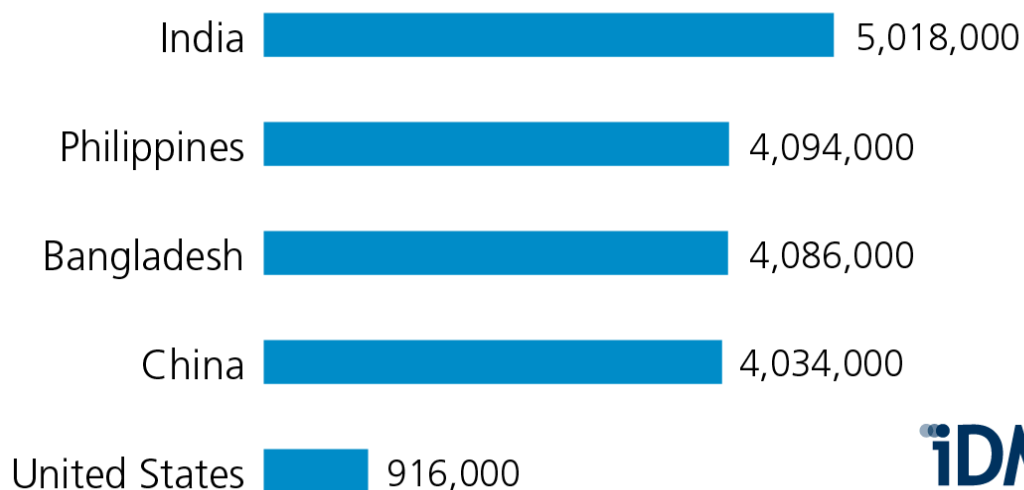
Many countries across the world are taking different positions regarding the recognition of climate refugees. Some nations experiencing the harsh impact of climate change (such as Kiribati and Tuvalu), along with some other nations (such as Norway and Switzerland), are pushing for the recognition of climate refugees in international law. These pushes include petitions, initiatives, and frameworks for migrational pathways. One of these initiatives includes the Nansen Initiative developed by Norway and Switzerland which aimed to provide protections for those displaced across international borders as a result of climate change and natural disasters. Meanwhile, other nations choose to adhere to the strict definition of refugees from the 1951 Refugee Convention, stating that climate refugees do not need to be recognized as they don't face active persecution.

IV. Questions to Consider:

With this being said, there are a few key questions to consider:

- What countries are impacted by climate change/ climate-induced tragedies?
- How can climate change or climate-related disasters exacerbate the complications in areas of crisis?
- What are the economic implications of recognizing climate refugees/ climate-induced displacement in international law?
- How could recognizing climate refugees impact the already existing definitions of refugees? How can it complicate the definition?
- How could recognizing climate refugees impact the protections of refugees fleeing from persecution?
- How would recognizing climate refugees complicate the administrative procedure of refugee qualification? How could it make the process easier?
- Are there any reforms needed in the process of helping refugees that need to be addressed prior to recognizing climate refugees?
- What are the political limitations to recognizing climate refugees?
- Are there ways to help climate refugees, or aid climate-induced displacement without recognizing this category of refugees in international law?

Five countries with the most new displacements by disasters in 2019



Sources and Further Reading:

<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2021/06/climate-refugees-the-world-s-forgotten-victims/>

https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-04/final_-_climate_induced_migration.pdf

<https://thinklandscape.globallandscapesforum.org/69735/where-are-climate-refugees-going/>

<https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/environmental-migration>

<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/climate-change-and-displacement>

<https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees>

https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/stocktaking_unfcc.pdf