

# Environmental Refugeeism, Displacement and Migration

- **DEFINITION OF THE TERM "REFUGEE"**
- The term 'refugee' has a precise meaning in international law.
- A refugee is defined by the ***1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*** as a person outside his or her country of nationality who is unable to return because of a 'well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion'.

- **OAU Convention Governing The Specific Aspects Of Refugee Problems In Africa, *Adopted on 10 September 1969 by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government. CAB/LEG/24.3. and which entered into force on 20 June 1974 also defines refugee.***
- According to the Convention, the term "refugee" shall mean every person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

- 2. The term "refugee" shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality.

- Refugeeism can be considered to be a widely shared, truly global ‘problem’.
- Almost every nation has to deal with refugees, although the seriousness of the problem and human suffering varies from one part of the world and one country to another, from one camp to another, the majority of refugees fleeing from, and being hosted, are in the developing countries.
- The refugee burden falls more heavily on poor countries than on rich countries, especially in Asia and Africa.

- An important point to note about the term refugee as used in the 1951 Convention is its restrictiveness.
- Many refugee advocates and non-governmental organisations have pointed to the inadequacies of the 1951 Convention definition.
- It is Eurocentric in its origins and ignores the reality of mass displacement through war and generalised conflict in countries of the South. The majority of persons in need of protection and assistance do not count as refugees.
- Despite the increasing role of environmental challenges in displacing people and turning them into refugees, they are not so regarded internationally
- Clearly, someone who flees due to environmental problems does not fall under the 1951 Convention's definition. Nobody gets asylum just because of environmental degradation.

- But environmental refugee has entered into the global lexicon.
- First coined in the 1970s by Lester Brown of the World Watch Institute, 'environmental refugee' became popularised in the 1990s.
- It is increasingly used despite having no agreed definition in international law and never having been formally endorsed by the United Nations.
- Furthermore, the term does not readily fit within the globally recognised labels used to define forced displacement: refugees (who have crossed internationally recognised borders) and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

- The most-quoted definition of an environmental refugee was provided by Essam el-Hinnawi in 1985, then working for the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).
- In the aftermath of the displacements caused by the gas leak in Bhopal in India and the nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl he defined environmental refugees as:
- *“...those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardised their existence and/or seriously affected the quality of their life”* (el-Hinnawi 1985:4).

- He identified three broad categories of environmental migrants:
  - persons who are displaced temporarily but who can return to their original home when the environmental damage has been repaired;
  - persons who are permanently displaced and have resettled elsewhere; and,
  - persons who migrate from their original home in search of a better quality of life when their original habitat has been degraded to such an extent that it does not meet their basic needs (el-Hinnawi 1985:4).

- Norman Myers has defined environmental refugees as:
- “people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their homelands because of drought, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation and other environmental problems, together with associated problems of population pressures and profound poverty. In their desperation, these people feel they have no alternative but to seek sanctuary elsewhere, however hazardous the attempt. Not all of them have fled their countries, many being internally displaced. But all have abandoned their homelands on a semi-permanent if not permanent basis, with little hope of a foreseeable return” (Myers 2005:6-7).

- Thus, ***environmental refugees*** refer to people who have been forced to flee their home places on account of severe environmental problems.
- The term 'environmental refugee' can only have a legal meaning in the narrow sense of people forced to flee when repressive forces use environmental destruction, such as defoliation or polluting water, as an instrument of war against a specific group.
- Cases include US use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and actions of the Iraqi Government against the Marsh Arabs.
- However, refugee claims of such groups would be based on persecution itself rather than the form of it, making the term environmental refugee redundant.

- Agent Orange was the name given to the most effective chemical herbicide, or plant killer, sprayed by United States armed forces in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War (1959-1975).
- Agent Orange penetrated the waxy covering of leaves to poison the entire plant.
- Agent Orange contained extremely toxic by-products known as dioxins. Exposure to dioxins has been associated with severe birth defects and certain rare cancers in humans.
- More than 19 million gallons of herbicides were sprayed in South Vietnam between 1961 and 1970. By destroying trees and crops, the U.S. military hoped to expose the hiding places of the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese army. About 12 percent of South Vietnam was stripped of foliage, and tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers and innumerable Vietnamese were exposed to dioxins. Toxins that leaked into croplands and rivers around the sprayed areas also had long-term effects on the food supply of the country as a whole.

- Marsh Arabs were victims of government-engineered environmental catastrophe.
- Following an abortive uprising against the Iraqi's Central government in 1991, the government began a systematic drainage of the marshlands.
- Starting in 1991, the Iraqi authorities built a series of dams, dikes, and canals aimed at preventing the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates from flowing into the marshes.
- The result, less than a decade later, was the destruction of the Middle East's largest wetland ecosystem.

- An environmental study carried out by the U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2001, based on previously unseen satellite images, revealed the extent of the devastation of the marshland region.
- The satellite images, taken in 1992 and 2000 by the U.S.'s National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), confirmed the destruction of around 90 percent of the marshlands, qualifying it as "one of the world's greatest environmental disasters."

- UNEP scientists attributed the desiccation of the marshlands in part to extensive damming upstream of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (involving Iraq, Iran, and Turkey), a process begun in the 1950s and continuing today. However, UNEP concluded that the "accelerated scale and speed of marshland disappearance ... was mainly driven by massive drainage works undertaken in the wake of civil unrest following the second Gulf War in 1991," and that "analysis of satellite imagery has shown that the marshland ecosystem had collapsed by 2000"

- There is disagreement among scholars as to the appropriateness of the term environmental refugee.
- Norman Myers & Jennifer Kent (1995) in *Environmental Exodus: An Emergent Crisis in the Global Arena* highlight the plight of environmental refugees thus,
  - There are fast-growing numbers of people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their homelands because of drought, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation and other environmental problems. In their desperation, these ‘environmental refugees’ ...feel they have no alternative but to seek sanctuary elsewhere, however hazardous the attempt.

- Richard Black in *Refugees, Environment and Development* (1998) and UNHCR Working Paper titled *Environmental Refugees: Myth or Reality?* question the value of the very notion of ‘environmental refugees’.
- To Black, the concept is a myth – and a misleading, highly politicised and potentially damaging one at that.
- While Myers & Kent claim that there were at least 25 million environmental refugees in the mid-1990s, and that this unrecognised category exceeded the then 22 million refugees as officially defined as well as thought that the number of environmental refugees might double by the year 2010, and could rise even more quickly as a result of global warming with as many as 200 million people eventually being at risk of displacement,

- Black argues that there are no environmental refugees as such.
- While environmental factors do play a part in forced migration, they are always closely linked to a range of other political and economic factors, so that focussing on the environmental factors in isolation does not help in understanding specific situations of population displacement.
- Governments have a strong interest in keeping the definition narrow because of the obligations they have to refugees. There is no consensus for extending the refugee regime to ‘environmental refugees’ because most “receiving states want to restrict it further rather than improve it” (Castles 2002:10).

- **Environmental Problems in Refugee Camps**
- Apart from environmental factors such as desertification, deforestation, lack of water, salinisation of irrigated lands, and bio-diversity depletion creating humanitarian crisis that could lead to mass exodus and thus produce environmental refugees, the actual refugee camps have also created serious environmental challenges.
- Refugees are often seen as an economic, social, political or environmental burden or as a threat to host societies and states.

- Environmental problems in refugee camps may be seen as a threat in three ways:
- **Firstly**, environmental problems are suggested as a security threat to the well-being of refugees, a threat at the individual level. The UN High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate is to guarantee security, the protection of refugees.
- **Secondly**, while environmental problems may also be seen as a security threat to the well-being of local people in host communities, the UNHCR's mandate provides only limited responsibility for the well-being of local communities.
- **Thirdly**, states see refugees as a security threat, expected to cause environmental damage, new conflicts, and general instability in a host society.

- The UNHCR document lists environmental problems associated with refugee camps as including:
- 1) natural resources deterioration (e.g., degradation of renewable natural resources such as forests, soils and water),
- 2) irreversible impacts on natural resources (such as serious negative impacts on areas with high environmental value that may be related to the area's high biodiversity level),
- 3) impacts on health (such as contamination of drinking water),
- 4) impacts on social conditions (e.g., women and girls have to walk long distances to gather firewood),
- 5) social impacts on local populations (e.g., competition over scarce resources can lead to conflicts between refugees/returnees and locals) and
- 6) economic impact.
- similar problems occur in returnee settlements and in the camps of internally displaced people.

- **The Environment and Refugees in the UN Resolutions**
- The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has paid attention to the environmental problems accompanying refugee emergencies since the 1980s.
- The Ogaden war between Ethiopia and Somalia (1977-78) and the influx of refugees into Somalia raised the interest of the international community in environmental problems in refugee emergencies and the relationship between refugee movements and environmental problems in general.
- However, it took a long time for the UN General Assembly to pass the first resolution concerning the environment and assistance to refugees in 1987.

- The General Assembly passed 22 different resolutions altogether dealing with the environment and refugees as well as the impact of refugees on the host countries (1986- 2002).
- It should be noted that The General Assembly resolutions are politically and morally binding norms for the international community. However, these are not legally binding norms, not even for signatory states.
- The General Assembly thus cannot force its member states to observe the resolutions, and their implementation depends on the will of the member states.

- **Estimating environmentally-induced displacement**
- Dana Zartner Falstrom (2001) defines environmentally displaced person as “one who leaves his or her home and seeks refuge elsewhere for reasons relating to the environment”.
- Jeff Crisp, head of the UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Services proposes to introduce two main categories of environmentally displaced people: 1) people displaced due to processes (for example, climate change, global warming, desertification, soil degradation, rising sea level, etc.) and 2) people displaced due to events (hurricanes, floods, droughts, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc.).
- The classification proposed by Jeff Crisp therefore combines elements already known from previous studies by Norman Myers (security risk) and Jodi Jacobson (separating local events from more general global processes).

- Due to the challenge of multi-causality it is extraordinarily difficult to develop and defend any methodology for calculating the number of climate migrants/environmental refugees. Some of the more prominent estimates are as follows:
- The International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) and Red Crescent Societies estimated in 2001 that for the first time the number of environmental refugees exceeded those displaced by war.
- UNHCR (2002:12) estimated there were then approximately 24 million people around the world who had fled because of floods, famine and other environmental factors.
- el-Hinnawi estimated there are already some 30 million environmental refugees, while Director of UNEP Klaus Toepfer predicts there will be 50 million by the end of 2010 and the IPCC predicts 150 million environmental refugees by 2050 – equivalent to 1.5% of 2050's predicted global population of 10 billion.

- Myers, who in 1993 predicted 150 million environmental refugees, now believes the impact of global warming could potentially displace 200 million people (Myers 2005).
- • The Stern Review, commissioned by the UK Treasury, agrees it is likely there could be 200 million displaced by 2050 (Stern 2006).
- • Nicholls (2004) suggested that between 50 and 200 million people could be displaced by climate change by 2080.
- • Friends of the Earth (2007:10) predict climate refugees at 200 million worldwide – and one million from small island states – by 2050.
- • UNEP argues that by 2060 there could be 50 million environmental refugees in Africa alone.
- • Most apocalyptically, Christian Aid has postulated that a billion people could be permanently displaced by 2050 – 250 million by climate change-related phenomena such as droughts, floods and hurricanes and 645 million by dams and other development projects (Christian Aid 2007).