

Ranks Of 'Environmental Refugees' Swell

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Amid predictions that by 2010 the world will need to cope with as many as 50 million people escaping the effects of creeping environmental deterioration, United Nations University experts say the international community urgently needs to define, recognize and extend support to this new category of 'refugee'.

In a statement to mark the International Day for Disaster Reduction (October 12), UNU's Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) in Bonn says such problems as sea level rise, expanding deserts and catastrophic weather-induced flooding have already contributed to large permanent migrations and could eventually displace hundreds of millions.

Unlike victims of political upheaval or violence, however, who have access through governments and international organizations to such assistance as financial grants, food, tools, shelter, schools and clinics, "environmental refugees" are not yet recognized in world conventions.

UNU says the number of people forced to move by environment-related conditions already approximates and may someday dwarf the number of officially-recognized "persons of concern," recently calculated at 19.2 million (footnote 1). Indeed, Red Cross research shows more people are now displaced by environmental disasters than war.

"There are well-founded fears that the number of people fleeing untenable environmental conditions may grow exponentially as the world experiences the effects of climate change and other phenomena," says

UNU-EHS Director Janos Bogardi.

"This new category of 'refugee' needs to find a place in international agreements. We need to better anticipate support requirements, similar to those of people fleeing other unviable situations."

Victims of sudden and highly-publicized catastrophes like the 2004 Asian tsunami or the recent US Gulf Coast hurricanes benefit from the mobilization of private and public sector generosity and humanitarian relief. Countless millions of others around the world, however, are uprooted by gradual environmental change, receive comparatively little support to cope and adapt and are not recognized as 'refugees' with the benefits that bestows.

"This is a highly complex issue, with global organizations already overwhelmed by the demands of conventionally-recognized refugees, as originally defined in 1951. We should prepare now, however, to define, accept and accommodate this new breed of 'refugee' within international frameworks," says UN Under Secretary-General Hans van Ginkel, Rector of UNU.

Prof. van Ginkel stresses that environment-related 'refugees' must be carefully defined and distinguished from economic migrants, who depart voluntarily to find a better life but may return home without persecution.

Dr. Bogardi notes that the term "environmental refugee" rankles many experts as simplistic, masking what are often compound motives behind migration and implicitly laying the blame on nature when often the policies and practices of people are the cause of displacement. UNU-EHS is working to establish an internationally-agreed glossary of terms to facilitate cooperation in the broad area of environment and human security.

As well, most such displaced people today migrate within their own country. There is therefore a major need for international agreement about a nation's duty to protect and support internal migrants fleeing catastrophic events or environmental degradation.

That duty is implied in the agreement produced by the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan (Jan. 2005) and international guidelines on internal displacement have been promoted. However, states' obligations need to be formalized, says Dr. Bogardi.

The statement coincides with the announcement of a new chair on social vulnerability at UNU-EHS, funded by a charitable foundation of the global reinsurance company Munich Re. Among the areas of study will be migrations forced by "slow moving catastrophes," says Dr. Bogardi, including desertification, diminishing safe water supplies and climate change-induced sea level rise.

Environment-related migration has been most acute in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also affects millions of people in Asia and India. Meanwhile, Europe and the United States are witnessing increasing pressure from victims of often mismanaged and deteriorating soil and water conditions in North Africa and Latin America.

And such migrations may grow dramatically in future.

Among many global problem sites, Sana'a, Yemen's capital, has doubled its population on average every six years since 1972 and now stands at 900,000. The aquifer on which the city depends is falling by 6 meters a year, and may be exhausted by 2010, according to the World Bank.

In China, the Gobi desert expands more than 10,000 square kilometers per year, threatening many villages. Oxford-based expert Norman Myers says Morocco, Tunisia and Libya each lose over 1,000 square kilometres

of productive land a year to desertification. In Egypt, half of irrigated croplands suffer from salinization while in Turkey 160,000 square kilometres of farmlands is affected by soil erosion.

Florida professor Tony Oliver-Smith is a UNU-EHS Munich Re Foundation chair holder designate for 2007-08, whose work will include study of the recent exodus from New Orleans and other environment-related migrations. He notes that in the U.S. Louisiana now loses to the sea roughly 65 square kilometers per year while in Alaska 213 communities are threatened by tides that creep roughly 3 metres further inland each year.

Internationally, the low-lying Pacific island state of Tuvalu has struck an agreement with New Zealand to accept its 11,600 citizens in the event rising sea levels swamp the country. By one rough estimate, as many as 100 million people worldwide live in areas below sea level and / or are subject to storm surge.

"Around the world vulnerability is on the increase due to the rapid development of megacities in coastal areas," says Dr. Oliver-Smith.

"Many cities are overwhelmed, incapable of handling with any degree of effectiveness the demands of a burgeoning number of people, many of whom take up shelter in flimsy shanties.

"Combine this trend with rising sea levels and the growing number and intensity of storms and it is the recipe for a disaster-in-waiting, with enormous potential to create waves of environment-driven migration."

He says it is difficult today to discern "environmental refugees" from economic migrants. In many cases a decision to move is a function of a push to leave one disaster-affected location and the economic pull of another, more promising location. American history offers vivid examples: the 3 million people who fled the Dust Bowl of the 1930's and

the 700,000 mostly poor people who departed to northern states following the Mississippi Delta flood of 1927. Their decisions in many instances reflected a combination of pressures.

Other questions include determining the permanence of environment-related dislocation – the difference between 'refugees' and evacuees.

"There is then the question of people forced to move involuntarily by dams and other development processes. The World Bank estimates that in the 1990s some 100 million people were displaced by such projects. In some countries, dams are poorly maintained and threaten communities. How should people affected in these ways be characterized?"

"The questions that surround environment-related migration deserve forethought and deliberation now as more difficult circumstances for policy-makers almost certainly lie ahead," says UNU-EHS associate and advisor Ben Wisner. "Much of humanity faces major threats with enormous knock-on effects at the regional, national, and international levels."

Dr. Wisner adds that it's important that initiatives to recognize and relieve the plight of displaced people not let national governments "off the hook for their failure to help prevent land degradation and facilitate land restoration and, in some cases, for their collusion with owners of forest companies, open mines, and large cattle ranches in practices that degrade land."

Note: UN High Commissioner for Refugees' 2004 "persons of concern" include "refugees" (people who have fled persecution in their own countries to seek safety in neighboring states, 9.2 million), civilians who have returned home but still need help, civilians uprooted by violence but who remain within their own countries, asylum seekers and stateless

people.)

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