

Forum: General Assembly

Issue: Addressing the Global Challenge of Climate-Infuced Migration and Displacement

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Introduction

Climate-induced migration is no longer a problem that can be treated as a distant consequence of climate change. Flooding, drought, sea-level rise, desertification and other environmental pressures are already affecting where people can live and how they make a living. The challenge for the international community is not simply to reduce displacement, but to prepare for it, protect people who are displaced, and reduce the factors that make communities vulnerable in the first place.

The issue is particularly difficult because climate change does not fit neatly into existing categories of migration. Some people move temporarily after a disaster, some relocate permanently after their homes become uninhabitable, and others cross international borders when they can no longer support themselves where they live. Existing refugee law does not automatically cover all of these situations, leaving significant gaps in protection.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), weather-related hazards have caused an estimated 218 million internal displacements over the past decade. The World Bank's Groundswell research has also estimated that, without strong climate and development action, as many as 216 million people could become internal climate migrants by 2050. These figures show the scale of the problem, but they also highlight an important point for delegates: climate migration is closely connected to development, infrastructure, poverty and governance.

Definition of Key Terms

Climate Induced Migration

Movement linked to sudden or gradual environmental changes that negatively affect living conditions, livelihoods or access to essential resources.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.

Climate Refugees

A colloquial and non-legal term often used to describe individuals forced to flee their home countries due to the sudden or progressive impacts of climate change, though it lacks formal recognition under international refugee law.

Slow-Onset Hazards

Environmental processes—such as gradual sea-level rise, increasing temperatures, desertification, land degradation, and ocean acidification—that compound over long periods and erode the habitability of specific regions.

Sudden-Onset Disasters

Ecological catastrophes—such as flash floods, tropical cyclones, severe storms, and landslides—that occur swiftly and trigger immediate, emergency displacement.

Non-Refoulement

A core principle of international law that guarantees no person should be returned to a country where they would be subjected to torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, or other irreparable harm.

Background

Climate change is rarely the only reason a person moves. Environmental pressures often interact with existing problems such as poverty, weak infrastructure, limited access to water and poor governance. This means that two communities experiencing the same climate event may face very different levels of displacement.

Sudden-onset disasters can destroy homes, roads, schools and livelihoods within a short period of time. Governments may then have to provide emergency shelter and basic services while deciding whether people can safely return. Slow-onset hazards create a different problem. Drought, desertification and salinization can gradually reduce agricultural and pastoral productivity until remaining in a particular area is no longer economically viable.

The distinction matters because governments need different responses. Emergency displacement requires rapid warning systems, evacuation plans and temporary protection. Longer-term climate migration requires investment in livelihoods, infrastructure, urban planning and, in some cases, planned relocation. Delegates should

therefore consider both immediate protection and long-term prevention rather than treating climate migration as a single type of movement.

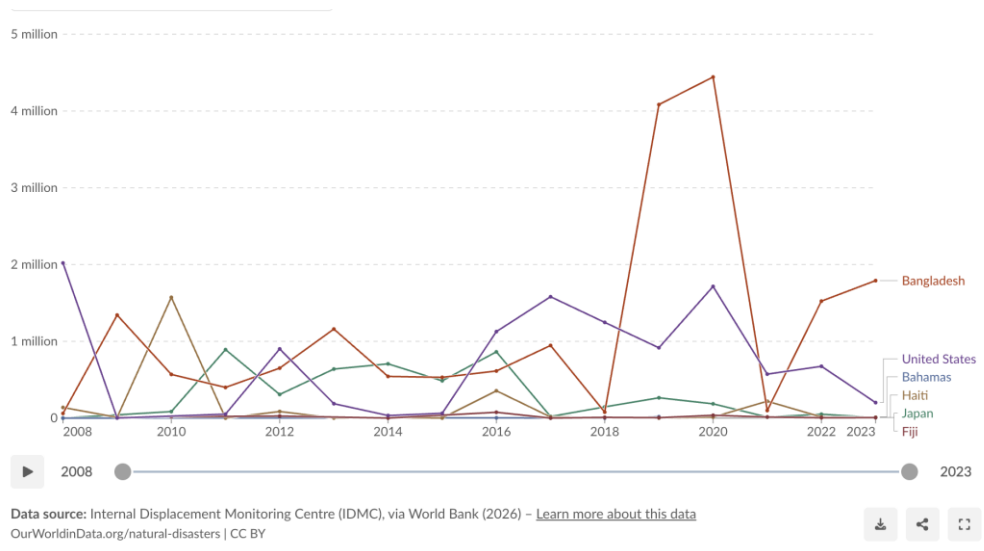


Figure 1: World Bank (2026) – Data on number of people displaced as a result of natural disasters from 2008 to 2023

Regional Hotspots and Socio-Economic Disparities

The burdens of climate-induced displacement are shared inequitably across the globe. Developing nations in the Global South, which contribute the least to global greenhouse gas emissions, bear the heaviest human cost due to limited adaptive infrastructure.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS): Low-lying island states in the Pacific and Caribbean face serious risks from sea-level rise, storm surges and the loss of habitable land. For countries such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, climate change also raises difficult questions about permanent relocation, cultural identity and the future of communities whose territory may become increasingly difficult to inhabit.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Parts of the Sahel face land degradation, changing rainfall patterns and prolonged drought. Pastoral communities are especially vulnerable when water and grazing land become less reliable, potentially increasing movement toward urban areas and placing additional pressure on already limited services.

South and Southeast Asia: River deltas and coastal areas, including the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna and Mekong deltas, face flooding, saline intrusion and sea-level rise. Movement toward cities can create new challenges involving housing, employment, infrastructure and access to public services.

Major Parties Involved

People's Republic of China

China faces domestic risks from drought, flooding and other climate-related pressures. It has invested in measures including ecological engineering, sponge-city planning and domestic relocation. Internationally, China emphasizes common but differentiated responsibilities and argues that developed countries should play a leading role in financing adaptation and addressing loss and damage.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) serves as the principal international body mandated to safeguard displaced populations. While its legal mandate historically centered on conflict and political persecution, UNHCR has progressively expanded its operational footprint through strategic climate action frameworks, offering operational support, disaster risk reduction tools, and shelter management in climate-vulnerable zones.

Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)

AOSIS represents the coalition of low-lying coastal and island nations facing imminent threats to their survival. Within UN assemblies, AOSIS advocates aggressively for binding global emission ceilings, full capitalization of loss-and-damage financing mechanisms, and specialized international legal recognition for populations displaced by the permanent loss of their national territories.

United States of America (USA)

The United States addresses climate mobility primarily through foreign humanitarian assistance, disaster relief operations, and strategic national security planning. While Washington has historically avoided expanding binding international treaties to include formal "climate refugee" statuses, it has increasingly incorporated climate-displacement metrics into regional migration management and bilateral foreign aid programs.

Refugees International

Refugees International focuses on advocating for lifesaving assistance, protection, and human rights for displaced people worldwide. Through field research and policy publications (such as "From Risk to Refuge: Protecting Climate-Displaced Populations in the Global South"), they directly push international bodies and governments to address climate displacement and fill protection gaps.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
December 11, 1997	Adoption of the Kyoto Protocol at COP3 to the UNFCCC, establishing legally binding emission target for developed economies.
December 12, 2015	Adoption of the Paris Agreement at COP21 to the UNFCCC, establishing legally binding emission target for developed economies.
December 10, 2018	Adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration by the UN General Assembly, explicitly acknowledging natural disasters and climate change as primary migration drivers,
November 6, 2022	At COP27, countries agreed to establish new funding arrangements for responding to loss and damage associated with climate change.
May 12, 2026	Release of the annual IDMC Global Report on internal Displacement via ReliefWeb, confirming that global internal displacement remains near historical highs at 82.2 millions.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

- Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 25 September 2015 (A/RES/70/1) - Serves as the universal blueprint connecting environmental sustainability, climate adaptation, and migration management.
- Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, 3 June 2015 (A/RES/69/283) - Directly drives global initiatives like the UN's "Early Warnings for All" campaign, helping low-income countries install disaster alert systems to prevent sudden-onset displacement
- New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, 19 September 2016 (A/RES/71/1) - Continues to be cited by advocacy groups and international legal experts pushing for protection mechanisms for populations fleeing environmental hazards.
- Protection of global climate for present and future generations of humankind, 6 December 2019 (A/RES/74/219) - Maintained international momentum that ultimately contributed to the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27 (2022) to assist developing countries facing extreme climate impacts and displacement.

Possible Solutions

The following ideas are intended to give delegates a starting point for discussion. They are not a list of clauses that should simply be copied into a resolution. Delegates should consider feasibility, funding, implementation and the different priorities of affected states when developing their own proposals.

-Closing Protection Gaps

Encourage Member States to develop practical forms of protection for people displaced across borders by climate-related disasters when existing refugee law does not apply. Delegates could consider temporary humanitarian visas, regional agreements, or other forms of admission and protection. Any framework should clarify who qualifies, how long protection lasts, and what happens when return is no longer safe.

-Building Early-Warning and Early-Action Systems

Expand international support for systems that identify areas at high risk of climate-related displacement before a crisis occurs. Early-warning systems should be connected to actual action, such as evacuation planning, temporary shelters, pre-positioned supplies and communication networks. International organizations could help states with limited technical capacity access forecasting tools and displacement data.

-Directing Adaptation Finance Where Displacement Risk Is Highest

Increase investment in projects that reduce the need for people to leave in the first place. Possible priorities include drought-resistant agriculture, water management, flood protection, resilient housing and climate-adapted urban infrastructure. Delegates should consider how funding can reach vulnerable local communities rather than remaining concentrated at the national level.

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