

Forum: General Assembly Second Committee

Issue: The Question of Climate Refugees and International Responsibility

Student Officer: Elsa Leino

Position: Chair of the GA2

Introduction

Present-day climate change, caused by the unprecedented warming of the Earth, is already affecting countries worldwide, as well as their populations. Climate change leads to more frequent and severe environmental disasters, including heatwaves, wildfires, floods, droughts, and storms, while also causing sea-level rise, landslides, and other consequences¹. This causes mass displacement of people, especially in vulnerable areas, who are commonly referred to as “climate refugees”.

“Climate refugees” is not a legal term recognized internationally under the 1951 Refugee Convention; however, it is widely used by the media². In some cases, environmental factors may be seen as a cause for people to undergo forced migration and therefore be recognized as migrants. Climate change not only directly causes the displacement of populations but can also exacerbate existing situations, such as those in conflict zones.

This issue is both an environmental and a humanitarian one. The key components of this issue include addressing the root cause of climate change, the displacement it causes, official recognition and the legal status of climate refugees, mitigation and prevention of the impact of climate-related disasters and migration, and the disproportionate impact of climate change on vulnerable communities, raising the question of international responsibility. International responsibility, in this context, refers to holding member states accountable for their contributions towards climate change and calling for international support for refugees

¹ “Effects.” *NASA Science*, 23 October 2024, <https://science.nasa.gov/climate-change/effects/>. Accessed 23 December 2025.

² Climate Refugees. “The Problem — Climate Refugees.” *Climate Refugees*, <https://www.climate-refugees.org/why>. Accessed 19 December 2025.

from the most vulnerable communities. International responsibility can create obligations for cessation, non-repetition, and reparation.

Definition of Key Terms

Climate Refugee

The term “climate refugee” describes an individual forced to leave their home as a result of the effects of climate change on their environment. However, “climate refugee” is not a legal term under the 1951 Refugee Convention, and no universally accepted legal definition of climate migrants and climate migration exists. Defining a climate refugee may include forced migration, temporary or permanent relocation, disruption consistent with climate change, and sudden or gradual environmental disruption.³

Climate change

Long-term shifts in temperature and weather patterns and/or a change of climate that are attributed directly or indirectly to human activity, especially carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels.⁴

Global warming

The rise in global temperatures is mainly due to increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases, which trap heat such as carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere.⁵

The Greenhouse Effect

A major contributor to global warming is the enhanced greenhouse effect. The greenhouse effect is a natural and vital process that allows the atmosphere to retain infrared waves or heat energy from the sun, leading to an insulated planet that allows living things to survive. This involves greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxides, which cause chain reactions of heating. However, these greenhouse gases make up

³ Apap, Joanna, and Sami James Harju. “The concept of ‘climate refugee’: Towards a possible definition.” *European Parliament*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698753/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)698753_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698753/EPRS_BRI(2021)698753_EN.pdf).

⁴ “What Is Climate Change? | United Nations.” *the United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change>.

⁵ “Global Warming 101 - Definition, Facts, Causes and Effects of Global Warming.” *NRDC*, 20 December 2024, <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/global-warming-101>.

a very small percentage of the atmosphere. This means that any excess output can lead to an enhanced greenhouse effect and large changes for the global climate.⁶

Refugee

“Refugees are persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection”, as defined by the UN 1951 Refugee Convention.⁷

Internally displaced person (IDPs)

Someone forced to flee their home due to conflict, violence, persecution, or disaster, but who remains within their own country's borders. They therefore lack refugee status and are not under a formal international registration system, meaning their own national government is primarily responsible for their protection and assistance.⁸

Climate-related or environmental disaster

Extreme events like intense storms, droughts, floods, wildfires, and heatwaves, increasingly driven by human-caused climate change, are leading to widespread destruction, displacement, and loss of life, impacting water, food, health, and economies globally.⁹

International responsibility

International responsibility refers to the obligation of states, international organizations, and individuals to comply with international law, as well as the consequences that arise from violations of these obligations.¹⁰

⁶ “Overview of Greenhouse Gases | US EPA.” *EPA*, 16 January 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/overview-greenhouse-gases>.

⁷ “The 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.” *UNHCR*, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention>

⁸ “Internally Displaced People.” *UNHCR*, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-protect/internally-displaced-people>.

⁹ “What are climate-related disasters?” *Shelter Box*, 16 February 2022, <https://shelterboxcanada.org/blog/what-are-climate-related-disasters/>.

¹⁰ Santos, Edmarverson A. “International Responsibility in Public International Law.” *Diplomacy and Law*, [International Responsibility in Public International Law](#).

Explanation of the Question

Background

Scientists began to observe the increase in global average temperature during the late 20th century, with the beginning of the creation of this problem often being attributed to the Industrial Revolution, when emissions increased significantly¹¹. Climate change is recognized to be caused by human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels for energy, the agricultural sector, and deforestation. A Swedish scientist, Arrhenius, presented the first expression of the theory of global warming in 1896, and Callendar (an English engineer and inventor) showed actual warming in 1938. It was only in the 1970s that the world saw an increase in the discussion, but it wasn't until the late 1980s that the world really started to pay attention¹². At this time and for many of the following decades, the issue was perceived as a problem of the future. However, in reality, climate change is already causing observable effects like increased frequency and severity of environmental disasters and extreme weather events. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), "Since systematic scientific assessments began in the 1970s, the influence of human activity on the warming of the climate system has evolved from theory to established fact."¹³ Evidence of climate change includes the increase in emissions, average global temperature, and rising sea levels. The industrial activities that our modern civilization depends upon have raised atmospheric carbon dioxide levels by nearly 50% since 1750.¹⁴

Climate change not only impacts the environment but also people. According to the Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID), of the 83.4 million IDPs at the end of 2024 globally, 9.8 million were displaced by disasters. Since 2008, an average of more than 21 million people have been forced to leave their homes each year due to weather-related disasters¹⁵. By the year 2050, it is estimated that there will be between 25 million and one billion environmental migrants in the world¹⁶. Climate change can also multiply existing vulnerabilities by exacerbating existing risks and creating new ones like food and water

¹¹ "What Is Climate Change? | United Nations." *the United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-climate-change>.

¹² "How we discovered the climate problem | ANU College of Science and Medicine." *ANU College of Science and Medicine*, 9 September 2019, <https://science.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/how-we-discovered-climate-problem>.

¹³ "Evidence." *NASA Science*, 23 October 2024, <https://science.nasa.gov/climate-change/evidence/>.

¹⁴ "Causes." *NASA Science*, 23 October 2024, <https://science.nasa.gov/climate-change/causes/>.

¹⁵ "Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025." *IDMC*, <https://api.internal-displacement.org>

¹⁶ Bassetti, Francesco. "Environmental Migrants: Up to 1 Billion by 2050." *Foresight*, 22 May 2019, <https://www.climateforesight.eu/articles/environmental-migrants-up-to-1-billion-by-2050/>.

insecurity and competition over resources, which contribute to conflict and compound displacement.

Climate change influences human mobility in both direct and indirect ways. Sudden-onset disasters such as floods, storms, and wildfires can cause immediate displacement, while slow-onset processes like desertification, sea-level rise, and soil degradation gradually undermine livelihoods, forcing people to move over time. In many cases, migration is not a single decision but part of a long-term survival strategy, including temporary movement, seasonal migration, or relocation within national borders.¹⁷ This complexity makes climate-related displacement difficult to measure and regulate.

The reason “climate refugees” is not officially recognized is because of concerns around it lessening the validity of the definition of typical refugees under the 1951 Geneva Convention. The 1951 Refugee Convention requires persecution for specific reasons (race, religion, etc.) by a human agent, whereas climate change is a natural phenomenon, and most displacement is internal (within a country) rather than crossing borders. The term “climate refugee” is legally problematic, as climate change is often just one of many intertwined factors (like poverty, conflict) forcing people to move, making it hard to define legally. As a result, terms like “environmental migrant” or “displaced person” are more commonly used, although they are still imperfect alternatives. The term “refugee” is crucial because it grants specific legal protections under international and national laws (like the 1951 Refugee Convention and U.S. Refugee Act of 1980) to people fleeing persecution, war, or violence, allowing them to access asylum, aid, and pathways to residency, distinguishing them from other migrants and ensuring states can't forcibly return them to danger (non-refoulement). Those displaced due to climate reasons, often drought, lack this status and protection.

¹⁷ Siegfried, Kristy. “Climate change and displacement: the myths and the facts.” *UNHCR*, 15 November 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/climate-change-and-displacement-myths-and-facts>.



Image of a family struck by flooding¹⁸

However, it is debatable whether or not that term should be recognized or changed. It has even been seen as an “unhelpful term”¹⁹. In 2019, Dina Ionesco, the IOM’s head of migration environment and climate change, cautioned against a “narrow and biased debate” around the issue. She warned that opening up international refugee law would be a minefield and said granting refugee status to climate migrants could end up excluding people who “actually need it”¹⁸. In a paper from Harvard University’s Human Rights Journal, researchers Randall Abate and Chhaya Bhardwaj argue that it would be difficult to find consistent terminology to describe the climate migration phenomenon that would both fully protect people and minimise the stigmatisation of marginalised groups¹⁸. Until such a protocol is established, Fry urged governments to pass national laws providing humanitarian visas for people forced to leave their countries due to climate change.

Accurately measuring climate-related displacement remains a major challenge. The absence of a clear legal definition for climate-displaced persons contributes to inconsistent data collection and reporting. In many cases, displacement is only recorded during the immediate aftermath of a disaster, while long-term or repeated displacement goes undocumented. This lack of precise data limits the ability of policymakers and international organizations to design effective responses and anticipate future trends.

Regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and parts of Central and Southeast Asia are considered particularly vulnerable due to a combination of

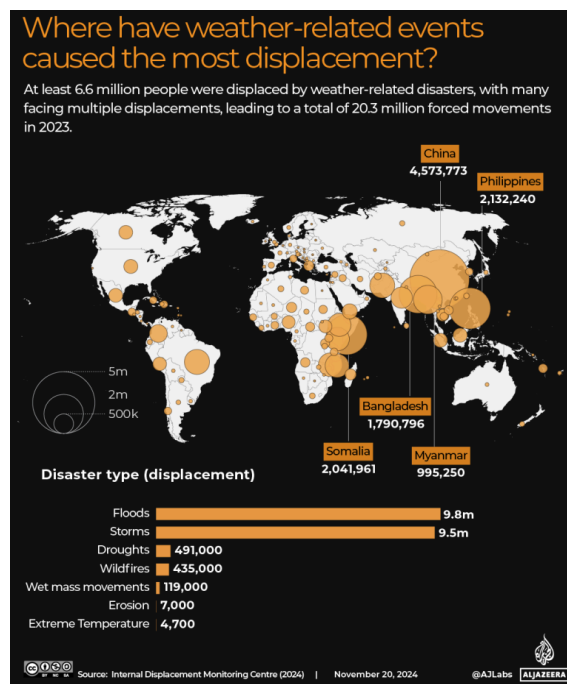
¹⁸ McDonnell, Tim. “Climate Refugees: No International Definition, Recognition Or Protections : Goats and Soda.” *NPR*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.npr.org>

¹⁹ Kaminski, Isabella. “There’s no legal definition of a climate refugee - does that matter?” *Wave*, 26 June 2025, <https://www.the-wave.net/legal-definition-climate-refugee/>.

high climate exposure, economic dependence on natural resources, and limited adaptive capacity. However, climate-related displacement is increasingly recognized as a global issue requiring international attention.

The poorest and most vulnerable communities - those who contributed the least to global warming - are paying the price and are hit hardest by this crisis.²⁰ This raises the question of international responsibility. Climate change is driven by emissions from various sources, primarily energy, but the countries most responsible vary depending on whether you're looking at current total emissions (China, US, India), historical cumulative emissions (US, Europe), or the impact of an average individual (US, oil-rich nations)²⁰.

International responsibility for "climate refugees" is a growing legal and moral challenge, with no single treaty, but existing human rights/refugee laws are being stretched to offer some protection, while calls grow for a new framework (like expanding the 1951 Refugee Convention or creating new systems for equitable burden-sharing by high-emitting nations) to provide clear status, rights (housing, work, asylum), and responsibility distribution beyond just source countries, leveraging bodies like the UNHCR and IOM.



Infographic on displacement caused by different environmental disasters around the world²¹

²⁰ "From climate science to global action: Who contributes most to global greenhouse gas emissions?" *World Bank Blogs*, 11 October 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org>

²¹ Siddiqui, Usaid, et al. "Mapping the impact of climate change on global displacement." *Al Jazeera*, 22 November 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com>

Key Member States and NGOs Involved and Their Views

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is severely affected by climate-related disasters, including droughts and floods, which have caused large-scale internal displacement. Climate impacts worsen existing poverty and instability, limiting the state's capacity to respond. Afghanistan's primary interest is international humanitarian assistance and support for displaced populations, acting mainly at the national level with reliance on international actors.

Pakistan

Pakistan faces recurring floods and heatwaves that have displaced millions of people internally. Climate-related displacement places pressure on infrastructure, housing, and food systems. As a climate-vulnerable developing country, Pakistan seeks international recognition of climate displacement and external support, acting at the national and international advocacy level.

United States

The United States is a major stakeholder due to its historical and current greenhouse gas emissions and its increasing exposure to climate-related disasters such as hurricanes and wildfires. While climate displacement is often internal, the U.S. has significant political and financial influence in international climate and migration discussions, acting primarily at the international level.

European Union Member States

EU member states are stakeholders due to their historical emissions and their role as destinations for migrants. While the EU does not legally recognize "climate refugees," it has expressed concern over climate-related displacement and supports resilience-building in vulnerable regions. EU states act mainly at the regional and international level.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

UNHCR addresses displacement and recognizes climate change as a driver and threat multiplier of forced movement. However, its mandate is limited by the 1951 Refugee Convention. UNHCR operates at the international and national levels, providing protection, research, and coordination.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

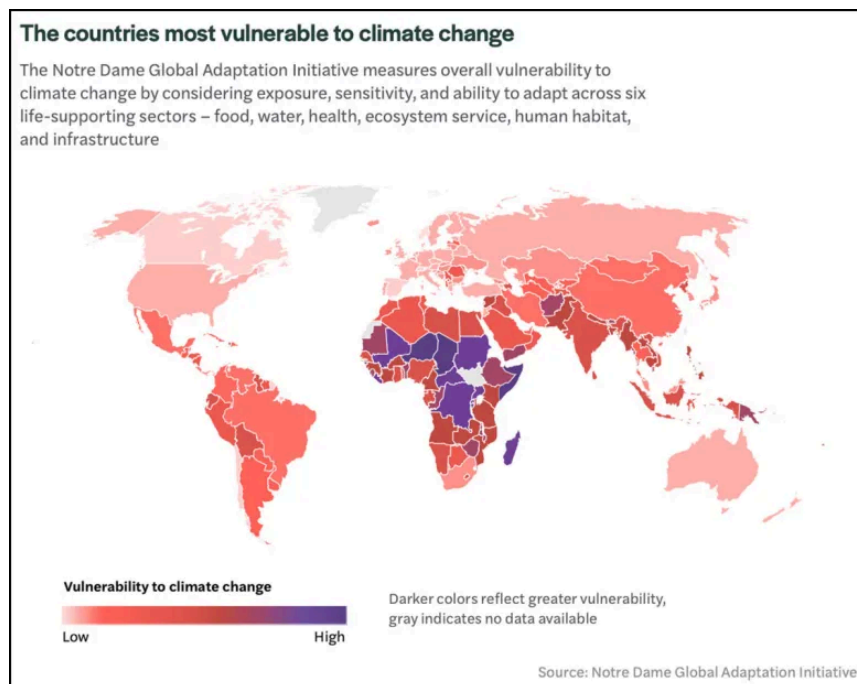
IOM focuses on migration governance and emphasizes the complexity of environmental migration. It plays a key role in data collection and international frameworks such as the Global Compact for Migration, acting at the international level.

International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP)

IRAP works to expand legal protections for climate-displaced people through legal advocacy and strategic litigation. Its influence is mainly at the legal and international advocacy level.

Greenpeace

Greenpeace is a stakeholder due to its campaigns linking fossil fuel emissions to climate displacement and its advocacy for climate justice and accountability. It operates at the international advocacy level.



Map displaying countries most vulnerable to climate change²²

²²<https://localnewsmatters.org/2023/08/03/uc-berkeley-study-on-climate-refugees-finds-more-aid-needed-for-natural-disaster-victims/>

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1951	The UN 1951 Refugee Convention defined a refugee based on fear of persecution.
1985	UN Environment Programme (UNEP) expert Essam El-Hinnawi defined 'environmental refugees' as: "those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardised their existence and seriously affected the quality of their life".
2012	The Nansen Initiative: a state-led consultative process aimed at improving the protection of people displaced across borders by natural disasters and climate change. It focused on identifying good practices and building consensus rather than creating new legal obligations.
2015	The Paris Agreement: an international treaty on climate change negotiated by 196 parties at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference.
2016	The Protection Agenda: created to provide a toolbox of policy options to help states prevent, prepare for, and respond to disaster displacement. It emphasizes disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and improved responses when displacement occurs.
2017	COP23 advanced discussions on climate risk financing and supported initiatives such as the InsuResilience Global Partnership, aimed at reducing the humanitarian impacts of climate disasters through insurance and recovery support.
2022	COP27 resulted in a breakthrough agreement to establish a Loss and Damage Fund for vulnerable countries, with forced displacement recognized as a form of loss. It also hosted the launch of the Climate Mobility Pavilion, providing a platform for policy discussions on climate mobility.
2023	The Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty: the world's first and only bilateral agreement on climate mobility. Australia and Tuvalu signed a

	bilateral treaty to allow 280 Tuvaluans (more than 2 percent of the national population) to migrate to Australia each year due to rising sea levels. ²³
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Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions, and Reports

The United Nations and its partners have established various frameworks to address the intersection of human rights, climate change, and forced displacement.

- 1951 Refugee Convention: the primary international treaty that defines the legal status of refugees and mandates their protection by host states²⁴
- The Nansen Initiative Leaflet (2012-2015): a state-led effort to create a protection agenda for people forced to cross borders due to natural disasters.²⁵
- The Paris Agreement (2015): a global climate treaty that aims to limit global warming and encourages adaptation to climate-related displacement (Decision 1/CP.21)²⁶
- UN Human Rights Council Resolution 7/23 (2008) and OHCHR Reports on Climate Change and Human Rights: a formal recognition that climate change directly threatens fundamental human rights²⁷
- Global Compact on Refugees (2018): a framework to improve international cooperation and responsibility-sharing for large-scale refugee movements, including those driven by disasters²⁸

²³ Gamboa, Liliana, and Debbra Goh. "Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union: The First Bilateral Climate Mobility Treaty." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9 September 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org>

²⁴ "The 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees." *UNHCR*, <https://www.unhcr.org>

²⁵ "The Nansen Initiative leaflet." *UNHCR*, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/media/nansen-initiative-leaflet>.

²⁶ *The Paris Agreement*. United Nations, unfccc.int

²⁷ *Resolution 7/23. Human rights and climate change*. https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/e/hrc/resolutions/a_hrc_res_7_23.pdf.

²⁸ "Global Compact on Refugees – booklet." *UNHCR*, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>.

Possible Solutions UN

Addressing climate-induced displacement requires tackling both the root causes of climate migration and the protection gaps faced by climate-displaced persons.

Climate Change Mitigation

Preventing large-scale displacement depends on effective global climate action. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions (particularly from fossil fuels and high-emission agricultural practices) can limit the severity of climate-related disasters that force people to migrate.

Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction

Investing in adaptation measures, disaster preparedness, and early-warning systems can increase the resilience of vulnerable communities. Strengthening local capacity to manage climate risks helps reduce forced displacement and protects livelihoods.

Legal Recognition and Protection

Climate-displaced people currently lack formal protection under international law. The creation of a new international legal framework or binding convention recognizing climate displacement should be considered as legal recognition. This would improve access to humanitarian aid and international support.

Safe and Regular Migration Pathways

Developing safe, orderly, and voluntary migration routes can ensure humane movement while reducing irregular migration and human rights risks.

International and Community-Led Action

Regional initiatives, such as an EU-led framework for climate-displaced persons, could set global precedents. At the same time, supporting refugee- and community-led organizations, as emphasized at COP28, ensures that affected populations participate in decisions impacting their futures.

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