

The climate refugee crisis

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Climate change is going to be an existential crisis for humanity unless tackled with extremely radical actions to stop it. Earth's climate is changing at a rate that has exceeded most scientific forecasts. For hundreds millions of people the consequences of climate change are happening now and in the immediate future.

In the recent years, globally there have been many emerging environmental campaigns. The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) report, published in October 2018 was a major wake up call for the urgency of the actions needed to stop climate change. All governments have been forced to talk about climate change, but, so far, talking is all they have done. The UK Parliament declared a climate change emergency in May 2019. This came at a time of escalating climate protests. Ireland followed the UK and “became the second country to declare climate emergency”, as joyfully reported by the national broadcaster RTÉ.¹ This was celebrated by the Irish government as a major turning point in dealing with climate change. A member of the parliament, People Before Profit TD Bríd Smith, had said “it will be interesting to see if the Government will support her Climate Emergency Measures Bill next month (June 2019), which seeks to limit oil and gas exploration.” Despite massive popular support, the Irish government prevented the bill from passing and continued to issue further oil and gas exploration licenses.

In this article, I am not going to go into the science or general politics of climate change but focus on one of the less debated consequences of climate change, species extinction and the numerous other ecological disasters: climate refugees.

What defines a climate refugee?

Climate change related human displacements are happening more frequently and in ever growing

numbers. The world has seen the doubling of the global refugee numbers over the past two decades, reaching a record number of more than 70 million. Most of these people were displaced by wars, conflicts, oppressive regimes or chronic poverty. Climate refugees will further add to this number and deepen the ongoing refugee crisis.

‘Climate refugees’ is not a new term. Droughts, lack of fresh water sources and crop failures due to climate change have already created famine conditions and displaced millions of people in Africa. The 1983–1985 famine in Ethiopia, partially caused by long drought had caused the displacement 2.5 million people. Ethiopia is not the only case. Uganda and Somalia were among other countries in Africa where drought and famine had caused great displacements. More recently, according to the research by the Women’s Refugee Commission, the drought in East Africa put 23 million people at risk. There were more than 900,000 refugees from Somalia who fled to neighbouring countries, Kenya and Ethiopia. At the height of the crisis in June 2011, the UNHCR base in Kenya hosted at least 440,000 people in refugee camps whose capacity was 90,000.²

Today, human displacements due to climate change and environmental disasters have spread to different regions of the world.

According to Article 1 of the 1951 UN Convention, as modified by the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is defined as a 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.’³

The Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol have been ratified by almost 150 states to date. The definition of refugees in the Convention was actually intended to

exclude internally displaced persons, economic migrants and victims of natural disasters. Therefore it pledges no provision for migrants fleeing climate change related or environmental disasters. More recently, the 2015 Paris Agreement concluded at COP21 (Conference of Parties) explicitly emphasized the need for its Parties to secure human rights, right to health, decent livelihood and food security for different communities of people aggrieved by the adverse consequences of climate change, expressly including the term ‘migrants’.⁴ But the legal framework to define climate refugees and granting people refugee rights is a long way out from being implemented. Judging by the current appalling refugee policies of the major global powers such as the European Union (EU), North American and other states, it gives us little or no hope that there will be a comprehensive recognition and protection of the rights of climate refugees.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reports that every year since 2008, an average of 26.4 million people around the world have been forcibly displaced by floods, windstorms, earthquakes or droughts; in other words, in many cases by the direct results of climate change.⁵ The IDMC website has an interactive world map that shows detailed displacement numbers occurring due to war-conflict and environmental reasons. The picture is scary. The number of climate refugees is increasing very rapidly.

The EU, in a 2019 European Parliament Briefing⁶ recognises this fact and reports on it but there is no political will to implement a humanitarian and care oriented protection framework for refugees. The EU’s immediate position is to bury this issue in legalistic bureaucracy. The briefing declares that defining ‘climate refugee’ is a complex task. No, it is not! There is enough scientific work, plenty of field research and real cases that should give the EU all it needs to define and recognise climate refugees. The issue is political, or in other words it is about the lack of political will to do anything. At the time of writing these lines, the EU funded and supported Greek border guards and EU Frontex forces are attacking helpless refugees at their borders and on the sea.

In January 2020, what was hailed to be a “historic ruling by the UN”, a person was deemed to have rights as climate refugee. In its first ruling on a complaint by

an individual seeking asylum from the effects of climate change, the UN Human Rights Committee has stated that countries may not deport individuals who face climate change-induced conditions that violate the right to life.⁷ The story of Ioane Teitiota is a clear example of what millions of people, especially in some of the poorest parts of the world are facing with the worsening climate crisis. In 2015, Ioane Teitiota from the Pacific island of Kiribati applied for protection from New Zealand after arguing his life and his family members’ lives were at risk due to the effects of climate change and sea level rise. His claim was rejected and he was deported.

There are millions of people facing similar problems. The homes of 1800 people on the Island of Barbuda were destroyed by Hurricane Irma when the storm made landfall on 6 September 2017. Residents of Barbuda were forced to flee to Antigua.

If the EU and other states want to find a the definition of ‘climate refugees’ they need no further research than looking at some the these cases around the world. Potential drivers of climate refugees include wildfires like those seen in Australia, rising sea levels affecting low-lying islands, the destruction of crops and livestock in sub-Saharan Africa, and floods worldwide, including in parts of the developed world.

As the climate crisis deepens, the UN ruling on Ioane Teitiota, although a step forward, is not a reason to celebrate. The solution to climate refugees lies in the call for “system change not climate change” as the system that created the climate crisis in the first place is not going to deal with the consequences of it with the wellbeing of the refugees in mind. As there is no evidence of the system tackling the climate change, there is also no sign of a just transition for climate refugees and others.

Climate Refugees – not just numbers

Climate refugees are real and people that are being displaced from their homes. If the climate change is not stopped, there will be millions of climate refugees looking for new places to live. From military chiefs of global imperialist powers to multi-national corporations, climate change and human displacement is recognised as reality.

The World Bank estimates that by 2050, there will be 143 million climate change-driven migrants from



the regions of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia alone.

The World Food Program reports that 45 million people are threatened by famine in Southern Africa due to drought, floods and economic hardship in their countries.

Climate refugees also interest the word militaries, not in order to challenge the system that causes climate change and refugees but to warn the political rulers that harsh measures need to be taken to stop the refugees from coming. In their logic, the response to climate refugees is not to stop climate change but to stop the people. The primary concern of military chiefs is indeed border 'security' and the protection of the interests of their respective ruling classes. This is the same logic applied to the war-refugees of today.

In 2017, senior U.S. military and security experts have told the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) study that "the number of climate refugees will dwarf those that have fled the Syrian conflict, bringing huge challenges to Europe." As reported in the Guardian, "If Europe thinks they have a problem with migration today ... wait 20 years," said retired US military corps Brigadier General Stephen Cheney. "See what happens when climate change drives people out of Africa – the Sahel [sub-Saharan area] especially – and we're talking

now not just one or two million, but 10 or 20 [million]. They are not going to South Africa; they are going across the Mediterranean."⁸

"Climate change is the greatest security threat of the 21st century," said Major General Munir Muniruzzaman, chairman of the Global Military Advisory Council on climate change and a former military adviser to the president of Bangladesh. He said one metre of sea level rise will flood 20% of his nation. "We're going to see refugee problems on an unimaginable scale, potentially above 30 million people."

Brig Gen Stephen Cheney, a member of the US Department of State's foreign affairs policy board and CEO of the American Security Project, said: "Climate change could lead to a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions. We're already seeing migration of large numbers of people around the world because of food scarcity, water insecurity and extreme weather, and this is set to become the new normal."

Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti, a former commander of the UK maritime forces and the UK's climate and energy security envoy, said: "Climate change is a strategic security threat that sits alongside others like terrorism and state-on-state conflict, but it also interacts with these threats. It is complex and challenging; this is not a concern for tomorrow, the impacts are playing out

today.” Morisetti said climate change would mean the UK military will be deployed more often to conflict and disaster zones.⁹

Climate refugees may have emerged from the world’s poorest areas but there is a strong possibility that climate change will affect the lives of people everywhere. Last week, at the beginning of March 2020, the residents of a village in the UK were told that they have to leave their homes. According to a BBC report, 450 houses, a pub, post office and several shops - will be decommissioned by 2054 because of the threat of sea-level rise and coastal flooding linked to climate change. It has been seven years, and house prices in the area have plummeted. Residents don’t know when or where they will have to move, who will pay, and they haven’t been offered any compensation.¹⁰

From the fires in Australia and the floods in Indonesia to abnormal climate events in Europe and terrible drought in Africa, the climate crisis is going to affect human lives and humans will try to move to different places to build a new life.

Who is to blame?

Wars, oppressive regimes and chronic poverty are the realities of the world and the global system we live in today. These are the creation of the economic and political ruling classes. So is climate change. Despite the growing outcry and global campaigns, the ruling classes are not willing to act on it. Capitalism – an economic and social system based on competitive exploitation and production for profit is the cause of climate crisis and the climate refugees are a consequence.

All states are fully aware of the growing climate refugee crisis but the ruling classes and the governments representing their interests won’t have a different attitude to climate refugees than they have to the refugees fleeing wars today. Since the late 1990’s the global refugee numbers have more than doubled and reached a record number of over 70 million. Most these were due to politically created problems such as wars, conflicts, torture, famine and oppression. Millions of people had no choice but to flee.

Today, powerful rulers continue to create these problems while blocking the refugees from finding safety. Looking back at the past 10 years, since the beginning of the latest wave of refugee crisis that began in 2011, the

very same rulers have concerned themselves only with building stronger border controls, higher border walls and stopping the refugees at all cost. Border barbarism is capitalism’s solution to climate change.

Furthermore, during the past decade we have seen a dangerous increase in anti-refugee racism and far right/fascist movements, especially in Europe and in the US. Trump’s racist border closures and his wall have been a source of encouragement for many racists and fascists in Europe. Using the refugee crisis and the economic downturn as an excuse, in some cases these forces have become bigger and more confident in their actions. In some places far right, fascist parties have made serious electoral gains using anti-refugee racism. Like climate change, the threat of the far-right and fascism fuelled with racism, hate and violence menaces the lives of millions of people.

Two years ago the Australian Navy was stopping and arresting refugees at sea. In 2019 Australian wildfires that have razed thousands of homes and blackened an area about the size of England may also “create the nation’s first climate refugees”, argued Michael Mann, a distinguished professor of atmospheric science at Pennsylvania State University. He said, “We’re seeing the beginning stages of monumental, catastrophic climate changes that will ultimately drive people away from large inhabited regions of this continent”.

Conclusion

The newly formed Global Ecosocialist Network (GEN)¹¹ outlines its key principles as follows:

There is a generalised environmental crisis of which climate change is the lead element. This crisis is extremely urgent and threatens the future of humanity and countless other species. The cause of this crisis is capitalism – an economic and social system based on competitive exploitation and production for profit.

Solving this crisis and surviving it involves an international break with capitalism and its replacement by socialism – an economic and social system based on collective ownership of the main forces of production and democratic planning. To achieve this we need a global mobilisation of people power. Such mobilisation requires a commitment to a just transition i.e. not one based

on attacking the jobs and living standards of the mass of working people.

The united mobilisation we need also requires opposition to all racist, sexist, national, homophobic and transphobic oppression.

While our rulers are busy with green washing the climate issue, militarising the borders and implementing racist policies against refugees, we must build strong campaigns against climate change and all forms of racism. We must defend the right of climate refugees and reject border barbarism of the states.

The call for “System change, not climate change”, best summaries this.

Notes

- 1 RTÉ www.rte.ie/news/environment/2019/0509/1048525-climate-emergency/
 - 3 The roots of the refugee crisis, Memet Uludag, *Irish Marxist Review*, Vol 4, No 14
 - 4 UN Refugee Agency, www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html
 - 5 *Legal Status for Climate Refugees: An International Law Concern*, Moushita Dutta, International Displacement Monitoring Centre, www.internal-displacement.org
 - 6 The concept of 'climate refugee'. Towards a possible definition, *EU Parliament Briefing 2019*, EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service
 - 7 Historic UN Human Rights case opens door to climate change asylum claims, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25482
 - 8 Climate change 'will create world's biggest refugee crisis', www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/nov/02/climate-change-will-create-worlds-biggest-refugee-crisis
 - 9 Climate change will stir 'unimaginable' refugee crisis, says military, www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/dec/01/climate-change-trigger-unimaginable-refugee-crisis-senior-military
 - 10 The UK's first climate change refugees?, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-51667018/the-uk-s-first-climate-change-refugees>
 - 11 Global Ecosocialist Network <http://www.globalecosocialistnetwork.net/>
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