



# **EKIN SNY JMUN BACKGROUND GUIDE**

**COMMITTEE: UNHCR**

**ENVIRONMENTALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (EDP)**

# UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)

## Description of the Committee

Around the world, millions of people are forced to flee their homes, communities, and even their own countries because of war, natural disasters, and environmental change. These people are known as either displaced persons or refugees, and because they are forced out of their homes, they are vulnerable to violence, hunger, and violations of their human rights.



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In order to help refugees across the globe, the United Nations established the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since its establishment in 1950, UNHCR has been coordinating international action to protect refugees worldwide.

The purpose of UNHCR is to protect and promote the human rights of refugees, which includes the rights to find safety in another State. UNHCR helps refugees either return home voluntarily, integrate locally, or resettle in a third country.

UNHCR is led by the High Commissioner for Refugees – currently António Guterres, former Prime Minister of Portugal – who is appointed by the General Assembly. The High Commissioner is supported by an Executive Committee of 87 Member States that meets once a year.

## TOPIC: ENVIRONMENTALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (EDP)

### INTRODUCTION

In 2012, an estimated 32.4 million people were displaced by environmental disasters such as floods and earthquakes, but this number is likely to rise to 1 billion by the year 2050.<sup>1</sup> While most of these people are or will be displaced within their own country, several are forced to flee across borders as the natural environment of their homelands become increasingly uninhabitable.

Climate change and its effects on human livelihoods are felt across the world, however, the majority of the countries affected by forced displacement from climate change will be in the developing world, where there is the least amount of institutional support and state capacity to handle the effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels, excessive floods, increasingly vicious storms, and desertification.

The international community has only recently begun to recognize the complex links between climate change and human mobility. The term “environmental refugee” emerged in the 1970s, but has since had its definition and phrasing disputed and negotiated, leading to multiple working terms for those people displaced by climate change.

Therefore, the concept of environmentally displaced persons has not been integrated into frameworks for handling refugees, which falls under the mandate of the UNHCR, or as a clear theme to be discussed at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. While international law offers protection to displaced populations through refugee laws, it does not extend that protection to EDPs.

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*Survivors of Typhoon Haiyan leave Tacloban City, Leyte province, the Philippines. Source: European Pressphoto Agency*

Updated from UNA-USA Materials 2024



## Background

### *Environmental Migration: A Disputed Definition*

The concept of the “environmental refugee” was first coined by Lester Brown of the World Watch Institute in the mid-1970s; subsequent prominent theorists in the area include Essam El-Hinnawi in the 1980s, Norman Myers in the 1990s, and more recently Diana Bates and Tracey King. Outside academic debate, however, the notion has not gained legal influence. There are no international or national institutional systems that recognize environmental change as a cause of migration, despite the fact that the UN and various civil society bodies regularly utilize terms such as “environmental refugee.”

Within the existing international legal framework for refugees, the accepted definition of a refugee, as defined within the United Nations High Commission for Refugees’ (UNHCR) Statute, is a person “owing to a 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 to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” Neither the United Nations High Commission for Refugees’ Statute nor the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees specifically mentions environmental factors.

However, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of ... circumstances beyond his control.”<sup>2</sup> When environmental degradation due to climate change creates a situation where finding food and water is a challenge, or when livelihoods are threatened, basic human rights are violated and social vulnerability becomes a major concern. These combined factors often lead to migration. Due to the lack of legal framework for environmental refugees, an international institutional vacuum exists insofar as these refugees’ rights are concerned, as “both environmental problems and population movements (due to such environmental change) often transcend the ‘protective’ borders of the nation-state.” The ECOSOC provides a suitable forum to address this issue, as mandated by Article 62 of the Charter of the United Nations which states that the Council has competence in matters including (but not limited to) “international, economic, social, cultural, educational, and health,” all of which are impacted directly or indirectly by environmental migration.”<sup>3</sup>

What do the following terms all have in common?

“environmental migrant”

“forced environmental migrant”

“environmentally motivated migrant”

“climate refugee”

“climate change refugee”

“environmentally displaced person (EDP)”

“disaster refugee”

“environmental displacee”

“eco-refugee”

“ecological refugee-to-be (ERTB)”

They all are used to define persons displaced due to environmental changes that forced them to migrate.

Source: UN Office At Geneva Press Release

## *Historical Response of the International Community*

Despite the growing size of this problem, the international community only began to discuss the issue two decades ago and has yet to develop a standard definition of an “environmentally displaced person” (EDP). Neither the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, nor its Kyoto Protocol include any provisions concerning specific assistance or protection for those who will be directly affected by the effects of climate change.

The UNEP, the environmental program of the United Nations, defines 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 jeopardized their existence and/ or seriously affected the quality of their life. By ‘environmental disruption’ is meant any physical, chemical and/or biological changes in the ecosystem (or the resource base) that render it temporarily or permanently, unsuitable to support human life.” 4

As the definition notes, environmental disruption can be caused either naturally, such as by hurricanes, thunderstorms, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes, or it can be human-induced, for instance as a result of logging of tropical rain forests, construction of dams, nuclear disasters, environmental pollution, and biological warfare.

## **Current Situation**

The cause for EDPs could be divided into four areas: hydrometeorological extreme hazard events, environmental degradation and/or slow onset extreme hazard events, significant permanent losses in state territory as a result of sea level rise, and armed conflict/violence over shrinking natural resources. These sections can be further simplified as: sudden onsets, desertification, sinking underwater, and human conflicts over food.

Sudden onsets are often a result of natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. Survivors of these tragedies have struggled in the aftermath as a result of drought and desertification.

Climate change’s growing effects have been historically disastrous for island nations such as Tuvalu who in 1997 lost one of its islets, Pretuka Savilivili, to rising sea levels. Scientists predict that Tuvalu’s remaining islands will soon sink as well, making it the first nation to disappear due to rising sea levels.<sup>5</sup>

Those who are already feeling the effects of climate change don’t have time to deny it—they’re busy dealing with it.  
- Barack Obama, President of the United States of America  
**Source: Remarks by the President on Climate Change, June 25, 2013, Georgetown University.**

Critical Thinking  
How do you think preparing for a natural disaster in an island country is different from the mainland?

Furthermore, millions of people worldwide living in lowland coastal areas are subject to rising sea levels, which affects developed and developing nations. As this threat continues to grow, governments and international actors need reexamine the traditional definition of “refugee” to establish legal rights for these potential victims of their environment.

Currently the Refugee Convention and Protocol provides the standard definition for refugee accepted by 147 countries that are party to the agreement.

It states that refugee status extends only to (1) persons outside their country of origin who are unwilling or unable to receive protection from their country of origin or to return to their country of origin due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted” in their country of origin, and 4) that persecution is based on “reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”<sup>6</sup> Persons displaced because of environmental reasons, therefore, do not fall directly under the international legal definition of refugee.

## International Action

Preparing for the worst, several nations have developed international policy frameworks focused on weathering the impending storms while providing better security for their citizens. States in high-risk areas, such as Vietnam and Bangladesh, have taken unique approaches to adapt to their environment developing plans deeply influenced by their nation’s political and economic characteristics.

Respectively, plans by these two nations have set the standard for developing effective government agencies and incorporating nongovernmental agencies in the process of disaster mitigation. Vietnam’s National Strategy for Disaster Prevention, Response and Mitigation to 2020 plan works to coordinate government agencies on the central and local levels through cross ministerial coordination in order to assist affected citizens with environmentally influenced migration.<sup>7</sup> Conversely Bangladesh has worked hand in hand with

NGOs – such as: Food for Work and Cash for Work – to help offset the effects of internally displaced refugees.

The cost of climate change, even on prepared countries, can be overwhelmingly great. Japan and the Philippines had extensive and effective disaster prevention, response, and mitigation plans, since they were aware of their geographical vulnerabilities.<sup>8</sup> However, natural disasters that hit Japan in 2011 and the Philippines in 2013 completely overwhelmed their disaster preparedness systems. A high percentage of the population became internally displaced and destitute, and despite their relative economic and political stability before the disaster, international aid was both requested and required for the states to return to normal.



*A protester in Tuvalu raises awareness of an issue close to home.*

*Source: Tikkun Magazine*

### Critical Thinking

How do you think preparing for a natural disaster in an island country is different from the mainland?

Despite improvements in policy development, we see that even the most prepared nations have yet to tackle much larger questions regarding the rights of externally displaced refugees. They also have difficulty providing long-term solutions for people displaced from their homes within their home country. Furthermore, academics have questioned the rights of refugees whose state runs the risk of being environmentally eliminated. This notion has arisen from the, “sinking island scenario” which considers the repercussions of rising sea levels and its effect on island nations.



*The Philippines were ravaged by typhoon Haiyan in November 2013, in spite of extensive disaster prevention plans.*

**Source: UNHCR Photo**

These questions have triggered responses from both individual states and larger regional bodies, resulting in new legislation protecting the rights of EDPs. An important piece of legislation is the European Union’s Temporary Protection Directive – which adds detail to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and provides temporary protection for refugees who may not fit the original document’s criteria.<sup>9</sup>

Though these solutions provide a stable framework for future development, they are far from perfect. Often, these solutions are only temporary, and they lack practicality that is needed in longer-term disasters. Recently nations have called upon the UN to update EDP’s existing legal framework through the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, some nations believe that definition with more detail and inclusion would lead to lower protection standards for refugees in general.

## **Recommendations for Creating a Resolution**

Currently there are no international or national systems that recognize environmental change as a cause of migration. Crafting a new framework for the environmentally displaced is a complex task due to both the short and long-term demands refugees inflict on a nation’s social services. Delegations should consider the many different kinds of natural disasters and how each affect nations regionally. Resolutions should address criteria for determining refugee status, as well as the rights of displaced people. We also encourage delegations to set a new standard in order to better protect and ensure the security of refugees threatened by environmental disasters and their aftereffects.



## Questions to Consider:

1. What natural resources exist in your country? Are there plenty of resources or are they scarce?
2. Has your country been affected by natural disasters recently? If so, what effect did those have on your country?
3. How does your country define refugees? What is the policy towards refugees in your country?
4. What institutions or agencies in your government support refugees?
5. Are there refugees in your country? If so, how many?
6. Where do most of the refugees come from and how long have they been in your country?
7. What part of your government deals with environmental issues?
8. What has been your relationship with international aid partners regarding (a) refugee issues, and (b) environmental issues?

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## RESEARCH AID

The Website of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) provides information about the history, structure, and functions of one of the main organs of the United Nations.

- ECOSOC <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/>

The website for the United Nations General Assembly provides background information on the largest organ of the United Nations and all of its Main Committees.

- UN General Assembly, <http://www.un.org/en/ga/>

This article was written by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees to address the problem of forced displacement caused by climate change.

- The UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/4901e81a4.html>

The Website of the Environmental Justice Foundation works for the protection and rights of EDPs. Therefore, they have a number of great resources, especially among their videos, about the issue of EDPs.

- The EJF <http://www.ejfoundation.org/page592.html>

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