



LIBRARY of PARLIAMENT
BIBLIOTHÈQUE du PARLEMENT

BACKGROUND PAPER



Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada's Role

Publication No. 2010-04-E
9 February 2010
Revised 1 February 2013

Penny Becklumb

Industry, Infrastructure and Resources Division
Parliamentary Information and Research Service

Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada's Role **(Background Paper)**

HTML and PDF versions of this publication are available on IntraParl (the parliamentary intranet) and on the Parliament of Canada website.

In the electronic versions, a number of the endnote entries contain hyperlinks to referenced resources.

Ce document est également publié en français.

Library of Parliament ***Background Papers*** provide in-depth studies of policy issues. They feature historical background, current information and references, and many anticipate the emergence of the issues they examine. They are prepared by the Parliamentary Information and Research Service, which carries out research for and provides information and analysis to parliamentarians and Senate and House of Commons committees and parliamentary associations in an objective, impartial manner.

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	1
2	LIKELY NUMBER OF CLIMATE MIGRANTS.....	1
3	CANADA'S LEGAL OBLIGATIONS TOWARDS CLIMATE MIGRANTS	2
3.1	Canada's Current Role in Resettling Climate Migrants	2
3.2	A Future Role for Canada	3
4	CONCLUSION	4

CLIMATE CHANGE AND FORCED MIGRATION: CANADA'S ROLE

Climate change threatens to cause the largest refugee crisis in human history.¹

1 INTRODUCTION

In January 2013, CNN Travel listed a trip to the Maldives as one of five “urgent experiences for 2013.”² Reports that rising sea levels are “exceeding our worst expectations” may mean that this low-lying nation of islands in the Indian Ocean will soon be uninhabitable, displacing its 400,000 citizens “decades ahead of schedule.”³

For more than 25 years, governments have been aware that climate change may lead to the forced migration of millions of people.⁴ Now, with the effects of climate change becoming increasingly apparent in some parts of the world, the fear of mass migration may escalate within the international community.⁵

Some population displacement will come directly as a result of rising sea levels or extreme weather events that leave some regions uninhabitable. However, much of the displacement will be caused indirectly, as a result of gradual environmental degradation leading to shortages in food, fresh water and energy. Such shortages may in turn give rise to armed conflict and violence.⁶ According to a U.S. national security analysis organization, “Climate change acts as a threat multiplier for instability in some of the most volatile regions of the world.”⁷ The least developed states in Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as small, low-lying island states, are the most likely to produce climate migrants.⁸

2 LIKELY NUMBER OF CLIMATE MIGRANTS

Estimates of the number of people who will be compelled to move by 2050 because of climate change range from 25 million to 1 billion.⁹ The most widely cited figure appears to be 200 million climate migrants by 2050.¹⁰ It has also been estimated that between 500 million and 600 million people (approximately 10% of the world's population) are at extreme risk due to climate change.¹¹

The numbers are difficult to predict because of the numerous and interrelated assumptions on which they are based, including assumptions about future global population and economic growth, the timing and impact of climate change events, and climate change – related motivations for people to move.

More accurate numbers may be considered for the subset of climate migrants who will have to move when their homes are flooded due to rising sea levels. One study projects that “between 7–70 million and 20–300 million *additional* people will be flooded *each year* by 3 to 4°C of warming causing 20–80 cm of sea level rise (low and high population growth assumptions respectively)”¹² [author's emphasis].

To put these figures in perspective, the number of “refugees of concern” to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) at the beginning of 2011 was 10.5 million. This represents about 5% of the 200 million climate migrants predicted by 2050. The UNHCR recently reported that “more people are already displaced annually by natural disasters than by conflict.”¹³

Experts estimate that most people who are uprooted by climate change will remain in their own countries,¹⁴ but a minority will need to relocate abroad.¹⁵ Considering the sheer number of climate migrants expected in the coming years, even a small fraction seeking to resettle in Canada could constitute a large number relative to Canada’s current intake of new residents. In 2011, Canada accepted 249,000 new permanent residents.¹⁶ Only about 36,200 of these were accepted for humanitarian reasons; the balance were workers or family members being reunited in Canada.

3 CANADA’S LEGAL OBLIGATIONS TOWARDS CLIMATE MIGRANTS

Those who think that Canada should play a role in addressing the issue of climate migrants have proposed several reasons in support of this position, including:

- to support international peace and order;
- to mitigate further damage to the global ecosystem, such as deforestation that may occur with uncontrolled mass migration;
- to fulfil a moral obligation to take responsibility for the effects of climate change because Canada contributed to creating the problem; and
- to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need around the world.¹⁷

In December 2010, Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (including Canada) adopted the Cancún agreements, which promote “measures to enhance understanding, coordination and cooperation with regard to climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation.”¹⁸

3.1 CANADA’S CURRENT ROLE IN RESETTLING CLIMATE MIGRANTS

None of the various streams in Canada’s humanitarian immigration program – the refugee stream, a stream for humanitarian and compassionate cases, and cases where people are admitted temporarily when it is “justified in the circumstances” – recognizes climate migrants.

The main humanitarian immigration stream is for refugees. Refugees come to Canada in one of two ways: either they are selected abroad to receive a permanent resident visa to come to Canada or they come to Canada on their own and claim protection once here.

A refugee chosen while abroad may qualify to come to Canada as either a “Convention refugee”¹⁹ or a “person in similar circumstances.”²⁰ Convention refugees have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or

membership in a particular social group. Under the current law, neither environmental nor economic reasons qualify a person as a Convention refugee or as a person in similar circumstances.

Those who make their own way here and claim protection after arrival are generally allowed to stay if they would face torture if returned home or if they would face a risk to their life or a risk of cruel and unusual punishment that is not faced generally by other individuals in that country. As is the case of refugees chosen from abroad, Canada's current inland refugee system does not recognize climate migrants.

Canada also provides permanent resident status to people who do not qualify as refugees, or under any other immigration class, when this status is justified by humanitarian and compassionate considerations or public policy considerations.²¹ This discretionary power provides flexibility for Canada to accept people in compelling and exceptional circumstances that have not been anticipated by the legislation. From time to time, the government uses this power to establish policies admitting groups of people in prescribed circumstances. For example, in 2007, the power was used to facilitate the immigration of approximately 150 Vietnamese people who had been living in the Philippines without status since the 1970s. To date, it appears that this power has never been used to admit climate or other environmental migrants to Canada.

Finally, Canada allows some foreigners who are inadmissible or who do not meet the regular immigration requirements to stay in Canada temporarily when it is "justified in the circumstances."²² Temporary resident permits are discretionary and are issued to those in compelling circumstances when the need for the person to be in Canada outweighs the risks. The government issues temporary resident permits both to people in certain groups, such as victims of trafficking, and to individuals in unique circumstances. It appears that temporary resident permits have not been issued to climate migrants.

The lack of provision in Canada's current immigration system for the admission of people displaced for reasons directly related to climate change is consistent with international law, which does not recognize such people as refugees.²³ However if Canada decided to extend refugee-type protection to climate migrants, legislative changes would not necessarily be required. Regulatory changes or policy direction alone could suffice.

3.2 A FUTURE ROLE FOR CANADA

Canada traditionally has been among a handful of developed countries that set annual quotas to resettle refugees from abroad.²⁴ During 2010, 22 countries admitted a total of 98,800 refugees for resettlement, which represented 1% of the 10.5 million refugees worldwide that year. The United States led the way, accepting 71,400 refugees. Canada accepted 12,100, and Australia accepted 8,500.²⁵ The total number of people Canada accepts for humanitarian reasons every year is larger than the figure shown, as in addition to refugees, it includes dependants of refugees, and other categories of people in need of protection.

It is impossible to predict with any degree of certainty how many additional people each year will need resettlement due to the effects of climate change. However, it seems certain that climate change will be the source of additional pressure on Canada's humanitarian immigration program to expand, perhaps substantially, in the coming decades.

If refugees are able to integrate well into the Canadian labour market and society, Canada may stand to gain from a new influx of migrants. But there are costs associated with helping newcomers to integrate into Canadian society, especially in cases where skills are not relevant or recognized in the Canadian job market, and where newcomers speak neither English nor French.

However, increasing the number of refugees admitted to Canada from abroad each year is only one of the possible responses Canada could consider. Resettlement abroad in a country like Canada is an expensive solution available to only a small proportion of the world's refugees. It is therefore generally considered only in cases where neither voluntary repatriation nor local integration is feasible.²⁶

For climate migrants, repatriation or local integration may be good options, because, unlike traditional refugees, climate migrants would technically still enjoy the protection of their own governments.²⁷ In some cases, climate-induced migration may simply represent an inability of developing countries to adapt to changing conditions. In these instances, Canada and other countries could consider providing development assistance – to strengthen coastal defences or to resettle climate migrants in new areas within their own countries, for example – as an effective way to help some larger groups of climate migrants.²⁸

Of course, such activities are simply short-term coping mechanisms to manage the consequences of the problem while the world, including Canada, struggles to address the root cause by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

4 CONCLUSION

Best estimates suggest that hundreds of millions of people could be on the move in the coming decades due to the impacts of climate change. Canada has an opportunity now to plan an orderly and effective response to the coming crisis.

NOTES

1. Frank Biermann and Ingrid Boas, "[Preparing for a Warmer World: Towards a Global Governance System to Protect Climate Refugees](#)," *Global Environmental Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1, February 2010, p. 83.
2. Jordan Rane, "[See them before they're gone: 5 urgent experiences for 2013](#)," *CNN Travel*, 22 January 2013.
3. Ibid.

4. In 1985, a report of the United Nations Environment Programme entitled *Environmental Refugees*, by Essam El-Hinnawi, brought prominence to the problem. In 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted that “the gravest effects of climate change may be those on human migration.” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change First Assessment Report, [Policymaker Summary of Working Group II \[Potential Impacts of Climate Change\]](#), June 1990, p. 103.)
5. Nurit Kliot, “Environmentally Induced Population Movements: Their Complex Sources and Consequences – A Critical Review,” in *Environmental Change and Its Implications for Population Migration*, eds. Jon. D. Unruh, Maarten S. Krol and Nurit Kliot, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, Netherlands, 2004, p. 69.
6. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], “[Displacement, Climate Change, and Natural Disasters](#),” Chapter 7 in *The State of the World’s Refugees 2012: In Search of Solidarity*, Geneva, 2012.
7. The CNA Corporation, *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change*, Alexandria, Virginia, 2007, p. 6.
8. Frank Biermann and Ingrid Boas, “Protecting Climate Refugees: The Case for a Global Protocol,” *Environment*, Vol. 50, No. 6, October 2008, p. 10. See also Koko Warner et al., *In Search of Shelter: Mapping the Effects of Climate Change on Human Migration and Displacement*, CARE International, 2009.
9. UNHCR, “Displacement” (2012).
10. International Organization for Migration, *Migration and Climate Change*, Migration Research Series No. 31, 2008; Nicholas Stern, “Part II: Impacts of Climate Change on Growth and Development,” in *The Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 77; and Oli Brown, “The Numbers Game,” *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 31, October 2008, p. 8.
11. Environmental Justice Foundation, “No Place Like Home: Where Next for Climate Refugees?,” London, 2009, p. 4, citing Global Humanitarian Forum, “Human Impact Report: Climate Change – The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis,” Geneva, 2009; and G. Granahan et al., “The Rising Tide: Assessing the Risks of Climate Change and Human Settlements in Low Elevation Coastal Zones,” *Environment and Urbanisation*, Vol. 19, 2007, cited in Climate Secretariat at the University of Copenhagen, “Rising Sea Levels Set to Have Major Impacts Around the World,” News release, University of Copenhagen, 10 March 2009.
12. R. Warren et al., *Spotlighting Impacts Functions in Integrated Assessment Models*, Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research Working Paper 91, Norwich, U.K., 2006. This finding was endorsed in Stern (2006), p. 77.
13. UNHCR, “Displacement” (2012).
14. UNHCR, [Climate Change, Natural Disasters, and Human Displacement: A UNHCR Perspective](#), 14 August 2009, p. 2. See also Sheila C. McAnaney, “[Sinking Islands? Formulating a Realistic Solution to Climate Change Displacement](#),” *New York University Law Review*, Vol. 87, No. 4, October 2012, pp. 1172–1209.
15. Environmental Justice Foundation (2009), p. 4.
16. This figure includes refugees and their dependants, those accepted on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, and economic and family class immigrants. (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, [Facts and figures 2011 – Immigration overview: Permanent and temporary residents](#).)
17. See Alan E. Nash, “Environmental Refugees: Consequences and Policies from a Western Perspective,” *Discrete Dynamics in Nature and Society*, Vol. 3, Issue 2–3, 1998.

18. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "[The Cancun Agreements: Outcome of the work of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action under the Convention](#)," Decision 1/CP.16, *Report of the Conference of the Parties on its sixteenth session, held in Cancun from 29 November to 10 December 2010*, FCCC/CP/2010/7/Add.1, 15 March 2011, para. 14(f).
19. "Convention" refers to the UN *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951 Geneva Convention), which was drafted in the aftermath of World War II.
20. [Immigration and Refugee Protection Act](#), S.C. 2001, c. 27, s. 12(3).
21. *Ibid.*, ss. 25–25.2.
22. *Ibid.*, s. 24.
23. The UNHCR reports that the "International Law Commission is working on a text that might serve as the basis for the development of binding international law on the protection of people in the event of disasters." (UNHCR, "Displacement" [2012].) However, existing international refugee law may apply to some people who are displaced indirectly due to climate change in cases where the climate change sparked armed conflict or similar security threat. See UNHCR (2009), pp. 5–6 and 9.
24. Traditionally, resettlement states have included the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries. However, over the last decade, numerous other countries have established resettlement programs. By 2012, 26 states had indicated willingness to resettle refugees. Still, in that year, 90% of global resettlement places were provided by the United States, Canada and Australia. See UNHCR, "[Frequently Asked Questions about Resettlement](#)," 27 July 2012, p. 2.
25. UNHCR, "[Trends in Displacement, Protection and Solutions: Ten Years of Statistics](#)," *UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2010, 10th edition*, 27 December 2011, pp. 24, 38 and 39.
26. See UNHCR (27 July 2012), p. 1.
27. See Biermann and Boas (2008), p. 11.
28. *Ibid.*