

Jesuit Seminar series 2008
A response to Climate Change and Global Warming

Migration: the ultimate response to climate change?

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In this presentation I am going to argue that a significant group of people who pay the price of climate change are those **displaced** by the effects of climate change. I am also going to argue that in most instances, while resilient, they are frequently the least resourced to manage the effects of climate change and are presently without any international agency mandated to protect and defend them and their rights.

In the last days we have all been concerned about the devastating effects of Cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy delta, Burma. It is now estimated that 100,000-150,000 people may have been killed. Millions are currently without shelter, food and adequate health services. The Irrawaddy delta comprises low-lying land and extensive lakes, and was the main rice producing area for Burma. Much of the land in the delta has been under cultivation and large areas of land surrounding the delta have been cleared for paddy cultivation. The Irrawaddy delta was home to 6.5million people, many of them poor subsistence farmers. At the time the Cyclone hit the Burmese farmers were beginning to harvest their latest rice crop. They had expected to have sufficient rice to also be able also to export a proportion. This is significant because the cost of rice has tripled since the beginning of the year, causing hardship in many countries and threatening the integrity of aid programs such as World Food Program.

There is division amongst scientists as to whether Cyclone Nargis was a manifestation of climate change or not. The influential Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in India has come out clearly stating that Nargis was a human made disaster. In a recent press release ¹ the Centre cited the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) assertion that cyclones will increase in their intensity as a result of global warming. Other scientists appear not to be as certain, even postulating that warmer ocean temperatures may actually reduce the strength of cyclones and hurricanes.² All seem to acknowledge that the removal of mangroves for fishing and the deforestation of neighbouring areas have contributed to the destruction.

¹ http://www.cseindia.org/AboutUs/press_releases/press_20080507.htm

² <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5jc3qimBeHZZVdK4kKeexLYkwBo4wD90HLNSo0> accessed 9/05/2008

But first a little background as to why a refugee agency such as the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is paying particular attention to the effects of climate change.

In Thailand Jesuit Refugee Service works with refugee populations who have fled Burma for political and economic reasons. Presently our staff in Thailand is anticipating increased numbers of people crossing into Thailand as a direct result of the Cyclone. In refugee language, when populations cross borders for different reasons they are referred to as 'mixed flows.' Given the political nature of Burma we are very attentive to the fact that while people may be fleeing because of their need for food and shelter, they could also have a refugee claim.

Looking more broadly there have been significant changes in refugee settings in the last couple of decades.

I returned in March 2008 from Syria from a mission that was assessing the protection needs of the approximately 1 million Iraqi refugees who have been displaced to Syria due to the conflict in Iraq. The Temporary Protection Regime, (TPR) has been applied for all Iraqi nationals in Syria upon the consent of the Syrian authorities. With this protection the Iraqis are considered as refugees³. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has a representative in Syria and The UNHCR operation in Syria is currently the biggest UNHCR operation in the world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that all together more than 2 million refugees have fled Iraq for neighbouring countries.

Because the Iraqi in Syria are considered to be **refugees** they have a number of entitlements: they are accorded international refugee protection, receive some material assistance and the UNHCR is seeking a durable solution for this case load: resettlement, local integration, voluntary return.

At the same time, it is estimated that there are over 2 million Iraqi⁴ who, because of the events surrounding the conflict in Iraq, have fled their homes but have not yet crossed international borders. They are still in Iraq and are called **the internally displaced**⁵. Because they have not crossed an international border their plight receives less international attention.

³ UNHCR, Syrian Arab Republic Country Operations Plan, 2006

⁴ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre Website. Accessed 3 March, 2008 <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

⁵ Internally Displaced Persons are 'persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.' (Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Introduction, para.2)

In recent years, you might be surprised to know that the number of refugees in our world has been decreasing. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that in 2006 there were 9.9 million refugees. At the same time, however, there has been a large increase in the numbers of internally displaced. There are currently an estimated 25 million internally displaced persons. The internally displaced people now outnumber refugees by two to one; their plight receives far less international attention. There are many reasons for this change in profile including the nature of the modern conflicts and the restrictions states place on people trying to cross borders and seek protection.

While the (UNHCR) is mandated to protect, assist and resolve refugees issues world-wide. The office of the High Commissioner has the task of promoting international instruments for the protection of refugees (1951 Refugee Convention and related protocols). There is no single UN agency mandated to protect and assist the estimated 25 million internally displaced persons. UNHCR has joined with other UN agencies, the intergovernmental organization IOM, the ICRC and International non government organisations to share the responsibility for assisting and protecting those displaced within their own country. For UNHCR this has required a large institutional shift in focus and capacity.

When the plight of the internally displaced people became internationally recognised there was considerable international effort to develop some Guiding Principles, which, in line with international human rights and humanitarian law, and with refugee law by analogy, set out the rights and guarantees relevant to the protection of IDPs in all phases of displacement, providing protection against arbitrary displacement; protection and assistance during displacement; and during return or internal resettlement and reintegration⁶. These Guiding Principles do not have the same weight as the 1951 Convention and its protocol but none-the-less do assist in providing assistance for IDPs.

The reasons why people flee their homes are always complex and again in recent times in Australia we have seen attempts to restrict peoples' access to protection by arguing, for example, that some people are economic migrants and not 'genuine refugees'. To try to separate economic factors from political has been increasingly difficult. You only have to look at our own political landscape or that of the US to appreciate this.

At present, another high profile place of displacement is Darfur. Sudan borders with Chad and on both sides of the border we have people displaced. If the Darfuri have crossed into Chad they are

⁶ See the website <http://www.internal-displacement.org/> for more details

considered to be refugees. Presently there are an estimated 200,000 Sudanese refugees in Chad. If those displaced remain in Sudan they are categorised as internally displaced. There are estimated to be approximately 2.4 million internally displaced persons in Darfur.

The conflict in Darfur has often been characterised as an ethnic conflict, with Arab militias pitted against black rebels and farmers. However, of particular relevance to tonight's topic, in June 2007, in an article in the Washington Post⁷ the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, wrote: “[a]mid the diverse social and political causes, the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change”.

Here Ban Ki Moon is unpacking some of the complexity of why people have fled in Darfur. This moving to explore the underlying and historical factors is similar to the way explanations surrounding the conflict and genocide in Rwanda shifted from a narrative of ethnic conflict between Tutsi and Hutu to a much more complex analysis centring on colonial powers and access to resources, education and political power.

Like the displacement surrounding the Iraqi war, the refugees and internally displaced persons in Chad and Darfur are categorised within the now recognised international framework of forced migration. They are not thought of as climate or environment refugees or migrants because the problem in Sudan has evolved beyond drought and lack of access to traditional grazing land to conflict, displacement and encampment.

Climate induced displacement.

Last year, Anke Strauss, of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an intergovernmental organisation striving to manage migration, spoke of reports that predict that the world will see an additional 50 million ‘environmental migrants’ by 2010. She defines environmental migrants as “persons or groups of persons who, because of sudden or progressive changes in the environment affecting adversely their livelihoods, have to move from their habitual homes to temporary or durable new homes, either within their country or abroad”⁸.

⁷ ‘A Climate Culprit in Darfur’ Ban Ki Moon, the Washington Post, 16th June 2007, p.A15
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/15/AR2007061501857.html>

⁸ Anke Strauss, Address to the High Level Segment of the Fifteenth Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, 9th, May, 2007.
<http://www.iom.int/jahia/cache/offonce/pid/1336?entryId=14030>

At present this population falls outside of the two principal tools for providing international protection, assistance and advocacy to the forcibly displaced: the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Guiding Principles for the Internally Displaced. New patterns of migration and displacement are rapidly emerging and they are not addressed by the current instruments of international law.

Those moving because of climate change and environmental degradation are outside of the mandate of any of the present international recognised instruments and mechanisms for protection and assistance. Furthermore, unlike refugees and to a lesser degree internally displaced persons, they also lack a dedicated UN agency mandated to protect and assist them.

Very recently⁹, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, wrote that there are three main causes for people moving:

- Poverty
- Climate change and environmental degradation
- Conflict and persecution

He wrote of the international community being seemingly ill equipped to deal with these movements and urged civil society, media and the private sector to engage in all these areas, especially in the area of advocacy. Focusing on the effects climate change Guterres acknowledged that while discussions about climate change are taking place there is still no real strategy for coping with it. Dr Jane McAdam from UNSW in a seminar at JRS in 2007 highlighted that it was only when there were hundreds of thousands of people displaced after the Bolshevik revolution that the protection mechanisms that I have highlighted tonight began to be developed. It seems that the international community reacts rather than anticipates.

In October 2007 I visited Kiribati, a nation state in the Pacific formerly known as the Gilbert, Phoenix and Line Islands. Kiribati, consists of thirty-two low-lying atolls and one island. It has a population of approximately 92,000 people and is one of the nations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. I want to leave you with some lasting insights from this visit.

- Kiribati is amongst the nations that emit the lowest levels of CO² yet it is at the forefront of experiencing the devastating effects of these emissions;
- Kiribati is already compromised by climate change
 - The water table has been inundated with salt water
 - Infrastructure damage of roads and sea walls

⁹ 'The nomads of no-man's land'. Antonio Guterres. The Advertiser, 1 March 2008.

- High infant mortality
- The people of Kiribati are often characterised as a ‘conservative’ people, unsure of the science of climate. They frequently attribute the changes that they are experiencing to the actions of God.
- Without adaptation Kiribati could face economic damages up to 34% of its 1998 GDP due to climate change and sea level rise¹⁰
- The President of Kiribati, Anote Tong, has said that many forms of climate adaptation are possibly too late for his nation and that now is the time to be talking about the ultimate form of adaptation, migration.

While climate change is now firmly on the political agenda, high costs are currently being paid by those already affected. Arguably these people, while resilient in spirit, are the least resourced to meet the costs of climate change.

Tonight there are four points I want to conclude with:

1. It is important that we anticipate the needs of people who are already experiencing the effects of climate change. In particular I am concerned about planning for the long-term migration consequences of predictable environmental forces such as global warming and deforestation.
2. International organizations are struggling to assist those displaced by persecution and violence; there is limited capacity to assist those displaced by climate change.
3. Australia needs to plan now for how we as a nation will assist those affected and displaced by climate change, especially our neighbours.
4. Australia is well placed to play a leading role in developing new international responses to those displaced by climate change.

Thank-you