CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT

Statement by António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees
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We are confronted with a number of global mega-trends that interact with each other: population growth, human mobility, urbanization, food, water and energy insecurity, all compounded by the global financial and economic crisis. Climate change is at the fulcrum of these trends, acting as an impact multiplier and accelerator. It certainly acts as an accelerator of displacement – whether we speak of the 20+ million people hit by climate-related disasters every year, or of the many more whose security and livelihoods are being steadily undermined by droughts, coastal erosion and other forms of slow but radical environmental degradation.

Nor should we underestimate the potential of these developments to ignite conflicts within and between states, especially in situations where communities are competing for increasingly scarce resources such as fresh water or grazing land.

I am often asked to comment on doomsday predictions of waves of so-called ‘climate refugees’ crashing upon the shores of the rich world. To this I am saying: fear and speculation can only blur our vision and skew our response, which must be responsible and solidary. What must preoccupy us is not this hypothetical flood of migrants, but the very real floods which, as I speak, are testing the resilience of real people and entire communities in large parts of the developing world.

The international community must address the challenge of climate-induced displacement, but it must do so on sound bases. I would like to propose three broad parameters for this discussion:

1) where legal frameworks exist, let us use them to their fullest. On internal displacement, including sensitive issues of relocation, return, and compensation, we have got international guidelines – and the African Union has recently made the major step of adopting a binding Convention to protect the rights of internally displaced persons. We must be serious about implementing these standards;

2) as I hope the Copenhagen outcome document will acknowledge, new modalities of international cooperation must be found to respond to the protection needs of those whom environmental degradation pushes across international frontiers, and those who find themselves abroad and are unable to return home owing to the impacts of climate change on their places of origin. My Office is willing to play a role in facilitating this necessary dialogue;

3) last but not least, our approach must be people-centered, building upon the strengths of people and communities while striving to reduce their vulnerabilities. Where sea-level rise leaves communities with no option but to relocate far from their ancestral lands, how can we preserve their identity and culture? First of all by involving them in the search for solutions. People threatened by the impacts of climate change need a hand up, not a handout.

Thank you.