CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT

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on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons

Effects of climate change such as sudden- and slow-onset disasters, but also conflicts triggered by a decrease of resources such as water or land, displace and will continue to displace a growing number of people. Most of them will remain within their own country. Thus, they will become internally displaced persons who have been defined by the United Nations as people who are forced or obliged to leave their homes for reasons including natural and man-made disasters and have not crossed an internationally recognized border.

Internally displaced people are among those who survived disaster, but often lose everything else: They have to leave behind their livelihoods, property, community ties and everything they cherish. They are desperate to find some shelter, some food, a school for their children and ultimately an opportunity to rebuild their shattered lives and regain their hopes. I have seen too many people who led a decent live before the wind-storms, flooding or landslides and now lived in abject poverty in miserable shelters, shacks or tents because their homes had been destroyed and new livelihoods were not available. I still picture the deep sadness in the eyes of the once proud pastoralists in Somalia whose animals had perished in the drought and now were unable to adapt to the life in the city they were displaced too. Many of the displaced were grieving for relatives they had lost in the disaster or were traumatized by the death and destruction they had seen. Others told me about violence, rape or how criminal gangs were terrorizing them while they were living in collective shelters. Displacement is particularly devastating for children: They not only lose the innocence of their youth but also the dreams for their future: I remember the despair and bitter tears of the very young girl somewhere in Central America who had dreamed of studying and was isolated in the settlement provided by the government to the victims of a hurricane that was too far away from the city to allow for any economic activities. I wondered what future there was for the children returning to the tents their families had set up under highway bridges and overpasses in New Orleans three years after hurricane Katrina. I picture the fury of the community somewhere in Africa that was relocated by the government because their lands along the river had become too dangerous a place after recurrent flooding everyone agreed was as a consequence of climate change. More generally: Displacement is not just going from one place to another. It creates new and exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities and generates multiple risks for the human rights of the displaced.

However, being displaced does not mean that people lose their entitlement to have their human rights – the right to life, security, food, health, education, adequate shelter – respected, protected and fulfilled. These rights have been codified in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and they are applicable to those internally displaced by the effects of climate change.

In natural disaster situations, governments in most cases are ready to assume the responsibility they have under international law to prevent displacement, protect and assist the displaced if the have to flee the peril of disasters, and find durable solutions for them through
sustainable return or integration in another part of the country. At the same time, the international community and its humanitarian and development organizations, agencies and NGOs stand ready to support governments in this regard. However, all too often, governments lack the means and the capacity to fully assume their responsibilities and the humanitarian and development organizations never will have the capacity to substitute for them. Building up effective disaster management systems at country level is a must, as are robust efforts to find durable solutions for those displaced.

We are here to tell governments that displacement will reach unmanageable dimensions and national structures and global disaster management systems will be totally overwhelmed by the scale of the humanitarian implications of climate change unless they are willing:

- To limit global warming by agreeing on substantial limitations on greenhouse gas emissions;
- To manage and reduce the risks of disasters caused by climate change by agreeing on forceful adaptation measures and robust funding to implement them;
- To accept that addressing the humanitarian consequences of the effects of climate change is a necessary and unavailable part of adapting ourselves to global warming.

It is therefore of utmost importance that the humanitarian implications of climate change are explicitly recognized by governments and addressed in the adaptation and risk management regime to be adopted here in Copenhagen.