



United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Combatting the Challenge of Mass Displacement Caused by Rising Sea Levels in the South Pacific

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UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

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Introduction

The Pacific Islands are made up of 22 countries and territories with a population of approximately 9.2 million people and consist of around 7,500 islands of which 300 are inhabited, spreading over an area of 30 million km². But figures for the region as a whole obscure its variation: Papua New Guinea has close to 7 million people and a large land mass which is more than the rest of the Pacific islands combined.¹² Nearly all of the Pacific Island countries fall under the UN's category of Small Island Developing States.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) holds that small island states are at great risk from the projected impacts of climate change, particularly in terms of slow-onset effects such as rising sea levels. Hence, refugees present an immense challenge globally but until recently, Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have been relatively sheltered from this phenomenon. However, changes to Australia's border security and refugee policies in recent years have significant implications for Pacific, due to the country's determination to prevent asylum seekers from arriving by boat in Australian territory.

There are many problems caused by the of rising sea levels, such as the displacement of people, and effects in others living beings. There are countless coastal areas at the vicinity of pacific that are already being affected by the climate change, and the perspectives to solve this issue don't bring hope. Due to the destruction of the habitats, people are getting forced to change places and choose destination as the closest developed country/territory.

Asylum in Australia is governed by statutes and Government policies which seek to implement Australia's obligations under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Australia is a party. Thousands of refugees have sought asylum in Australia over the past decade, with the main forces driving movement being war, civil unrest and persecution. The annual refugee quota is currently 20,000 people. From 1945 to the early 1990s, more than half a million refugees and other displaced persons were accepted into Australia.

Historically, most asylum seekers arrived by plane. However, there was an increasing number of asylum seekers arriving by boat in the late 2000s and early 2010s, which was met with some public disapproval. In 2011-2012, asylum seekers arriving by boat outnumbered those arriving by plane for the first time. Three waves of asylum seekers arriving by boat have been identified: Vietnamese between 1976 and 1981; Indochinese asylum seekers from 1989 to 1998; and people of Middle East origin, and the use of people smugglers, from 1999.

The visa policy of the current government is to detain persons entering or being in Australia without a valid visa until those persons can be returned to their home country. Australia is the only country in the world with a policy of mandatory detention and offshore processing of asylum seekers who arrive without a valid visa.



Asylum policy is a contentious wedge issue in Australian politics, with the two major political parties in Australia arguing that the issue is a border control problem and one concerning the safety of those attempting to come to the nation by boat.

Definition of Key Terms

Asylum Seekers

Someone who leaves their country for political reasons or war and hopes to get a protection from the new country and give them permission they have been traveled.

Immigration Detention

The deprivation of liberty for migration-related reasons. In most countries, immigration authorities have the power to hold non-citizens on grounds relating to a person's migration situation. This is an administrative or civil power that operates separately to the powers given to the police and criminal courts. In contrast, criminal incarceration is the deprivation of liberty of a citizen or non-citizen due to criminal charges or convictions.

International Aid

Money, goods and services given by the government of one country or a multilateral institution such as the World Bank or IMF to help another country.

Maritime Arrivals

An "unauthorized maritime arrival" is a person who has entered Australia by sea, at an excised offshore place at any time after the excision time for that place, or at any other place at any time on or after the commencement of the Migration Amendment (*detailed information about the amendment is included in the following pages*)

Pacific Solution

The Pacific Solution is the name given to the Government of Australia policy of transporting asylum seekers to detention centers on island nations in the Pacific Ocean, rather than allowing them to land on the Australian mainland.

Refugees

a person who has escaped from their own country for political, religious, or economic reasons or because of a war.

Regional Processing

A type of an immigrant asylum center. The Manus Regional Processing Centre was one of a number of offshore Australian immigration detention facilities.



Resettlement

The act or process of helping someone move to another place to live, or the act of moving to another place to live **i.e.** the resettlement of refugees.

General Overview

According to statistics published by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, every year since 2008, an average of 26.4 million persons around the world have been forcibly displaced by floods, windstorms, earthquakes or droughts. This is equivalent to one person being displaced every second. Depending on the frequency and scale of the major natural disasters occurring, there are significant fluctuations in the total number of displaced people from one year to the next, yet the trend over recent decades has been on the rise. Many find refuge within their own country, but some are forced to go abroad. With climate change, the number of 'climate refugees' will rise in the future.

Melting glaciers and polar ice caps increases the sea level: Ice formations melt in a certain amount each year. This change is happening naturally every year. However, in the last few, it has been rising more than the average summer melting, caused by global warming. Currently, the rise in sea levels is calculated as 3,2 millimeters per year.

As the consequences, when there is a change in sea levels, even if it is small scale, it affects the coasts, habitats in a devastating way. It may cause destructive erosion, aquifer and agricultural soil contamination, lost habitat for fish, birds and plants, and wetland flooding. Also, higher sea levels mean stronger storms. Low-lying islands can be swallowed by the oceans due to sea level problem and may cause large scale of land disappearance and even some countries.

Hundreds of people are living in these areas, where will (and already are) becoming vulnerable to flooding, and therefore higher sea levels will force them to abandon their homes and relocate. It's not only a problem of displacement: those people are forced to flee, leaving behind not only material things, but immaterial: a whole culture. In addition, submerged areas threaten the local biodiversity.

Major Parties Involved

Australia

Australia's refugee policy and practice is complex and contradictory. On the one hand, Australia portrays itself as a liberal international country, and it has a strong track record of allowing refugees to relocate. In 2014, it accepted 11,600 (11 percent) of the 105,200 global resettlement arrivals - only third place in the United States and Canada (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2015) - and in 2015 it agreed to receive another 12,000 conflict refugees Syria. On the other hand, since the 1990s, Australia has taken on a large scale and is considered poorly managed. As a

result, there have been many twists and turns in refugee policy as successive governments have attempted to tackle the intermittent flows of asylum seekers coming from the northern borders of Australia. This section was most important for the Pacific.

Help for other countries and other funds makes PICs vulnerable to pressure from their nearest neighbors and creates the danger of shifting Australia's "problem" with unauthorized boat entrances in neighboring Pacific countries.

Fiji

River floods occur almost every rainy season and occasionally in the dry season during La Niña events. Major floods are usually associated with severe weather events such as tropical depression and hurricanes that cause heavy rainfall. The annual maximum and minimum temperatures have increased in both Suva and Nadi since 1942. In Suva, the maximum temperatures have risen by 0.15 ° C per decade. At the airport Nadi the rate of increase was 0.04 ° C per decade. Minimum temperature trends are greater than the maximum temperature trends. In Suva, the minimum temperatures are around one rate of 0.26 ° C per decade increased and at Nadi airport, the rate of increase was 0.13 ° C per decade. These temperature increases are in line with the global warming pattern. At both Nadi Airport and Suva the number of cool nights is decreasing, and the number of warm days is increasing. As ocean water warms it expands causing the sea level to rise. The melting of glaciers and ice sheets also contributes to sea-level rise. Instruments mounted on satellites and tide gauges are used to measure sea level. Satellite data indicate sea level has risen in Fiji by about 6 mm per year since 1993. This is larger than the global average of 2.8–3.6 mm per year. This higher rate of rise may be partly related to natural fluctuations that take place year to year or decade to decade caused by phenomena such as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation.

Papua New Guinea

For over twenty years, the islanders have been fighting against rising sea levels. The islanders built embankment walls and planted mangroves to hold back the rising tides, but it's a fight against the inevitable. Most people believe that someday everyone must go. "Due to sea-level rise, the water flows into the village, into our gardens and houses. We cannot grow light food anymore because the salt water kills the soil," said Jarreanne (Islander) Many households and schools use rainwater tanks. After periods of drought, these tanks can dry up quickly, causing schools to be closed early because they cannot provide enough water for the students daily.

Timeline of Events

Month Year	Event



1950	There are no clear trends for average rainfall or extremes over the past 30 years, islands in the central Pacific are generally becoming drier and islands in the northwest and southwest Pacific are generally becoming wetter.
1961	Region-wide, average annual temperatures have increased at an average rate of 0.18°C per decade
1970	Sea-surface temperatures have increased at a rate of between 0.07 and 0.23°C per decade While the overall frequency of tropical storms has remained level, occurrence of major tropical storms (Category 4 and 5) has generally increased.
1990	Sea level rise in the region is around two to four times the global average, likely due primarily to natural cyclic phenomena, such as ENSO. Average sea levels have risen 10-15-centimeter (cm) region- wide and up to 20 cm in the northwest Pacific islands
2001-2008	A policy instituted in 2001 by John Howard’s administration and extended until 2008, known as the “Pacific Solution,” diverted asylum seekers to Pacific Island states—including Nauru and Papua New Guinea—for offshore processing.
2011	The <i>Migration Amendment Bill 2011</i> is introduced to the Australian Parliament. The Bill aims to establish a formal administrative process for assessing the claims of persons who do not fit the Refugee Convention’s formal definition of a refugee but who would still be at grave risk of persecution, torture or death if returned to their country of origin.
2014	59.5 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations, of whom 19.5 million were officially refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015).



Migration Act 1958:

His long title is "A Law on the Entry and Presence of States in Australia." The law has changed the current legislation for immigration to Australia several times. The 1958 Act replaced the 1901 Immigration Restrictive Act, which formed the basis of White Australia's policy, abolished the infamous "dictation test" abolished, and replaced by a general visa system (or entry permit) instructions of the 1901 Act.

New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016):

The New York Declaration on Migrants and Refugees, adopted on 19 September 2016, is the first UN declaration on migration adopted at this level. It recognizes that migration and refugee issues have become important issues on the international agenda, that a comprehensive approach to human mobility is urgently needed, and that the protection of refugees is a shared international responsibility that promotes global cooperation on migration requires and reinforces. The declaration reaffirms the importance of the international protection system (Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol) and the obligation to fully respect the human rights of refugees and migrants. It sets out the core elements of a comprehensive framework for the response to large-scale refugees to be applied to major refugee movements and lengthy refugee situations. The statement calls on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to propose a global refugee pact and also foresees the negotiation of a global "pact for safe, orderly and regular migration".

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Compact Migration (2018):

The Global Compact for secure, orderly and regular migration provides the first international and non-binding co-operative framework for migration. It is the result of a comprehensive discussion and negotiation process between all United Nations member states, beginning with the New York Declaration unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2016. The European Union and its Member States have participated in the UN discussions on the Global Compact for migration from the beginning, which have led to a Global Compact that largely reflects the European objectives. The aim of the Global Compact on Migration is to carry out migration in a secure, orderly and regular manner. These include concrete measures to help countries reduce irregular migration, for example through increased cooperation in the fight against migration factors, the fight against trafficking in human beings and the smuggling of migrants, the management of borders and the facilitation of return. It will also help focus on ways for regular migration. The Pact will also underpin the existing work of the EU with third countries and international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Refugee Organization (UNHCR) as an international cooperative framework. All these aspects are in line with the priorities and objectives of the EU.



Evaluation of the Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Concerning the displacements caused by climate change in the South Pacific, there are some major issues that should be tackled, such as: are the Islanders affected by rise sea level “refugees”, or victims of environmental catastrophe, and is this relevant to international responses? Do states have international legal obligations to “protect” people displaced by climate change? Do states which emit particularly high levels of greenhouse gases have any special responsibilities?

So far, the national and international response to those challenges have been limited, and protection for the people affected remains inadequate. What adds further to the gap in the protection of such people – who are often described as 'climate refugees' – is that there is neither a clear definition for this category of people, nor are they covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention. The latter extends only to people who have a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and are unable or unwilling to seek protection from their home countries.

It also means that the residents of the small islands of Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu, where one in ten persons has migrated within the past decade, cannot be classified as refugees, even though those who remain are 'trapped' in worsening environmental conditions.

To address the issue of such large movements of refugees and migrants, on 19 September 2016 the UN General Assembly adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, in which it called for the development of two global compacts, one on refugees and one on other migrants. While the reasons for the internal or international displacement of individual migrants or diasporas vary, the UN Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council identify natural disasters as the number one cause for this phenomenon. With rising sea levels, desertification and extreme weather events, climate action must be a part of any meaningful agreement on refugees or migrants. Governments are currently negotiating a global compact on safe, orderly and regular migration. The compact is meant to protect the rights of those displaced and help address the root economic, environmental and social drivers that are compelling people to leave their communities and countries. In addition to that, on 5 February 2018, the UN released the draft compact (the Zero Draft). A key area in which the document falls short is on commitments to tackle the primary causes of migration. A stated aim of the compact is to 'mitigate the adverse drivers and structural factors that hinder people from building and maintaining sustainable livelihoods in their countries of origin'. However, the current text lacks actionable commitments to control the numerous man-made forces underlying global mass migration.

As outlined in the international mapping of relevant policy agendas, the final text of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) – the most comprehensive agreement ever negotiated on international migration - has broadly included climate change and environmental factors. This historical migration policy achievement could trigger a review of existing national human mobility policies and frameworks in line with the GCM provisions. New mobility policies and frameworks could also be developed by governments based on this compact, opening the possibility to further mainstream climate and environmental dimensions.

Possible Solutions

Based on the elements identified in the previous topic, a few recommendations could be of relevance to reach solutions: Firstly, the international community should work towards a clear definition for the category of people displaced or affected by climate change; or consider covering them in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Secondly, new mobility policies and frameworks could also be developed by governments, opening the possibility to further mainstream climate and environmental dimensions. Thirdly, respect and reinforce climate change agreements and policies is fundamental to reduce/ combat climate change effects.

Furthermore, the international community should be concerned in protecting people in need of international protection in climate change and disaster contexts; support for immediate and ongoing needs; strengthen infrastructure and protect environment in areas where large movements of refugees live; increasing opportunities for sustainable return for refugees and addressing root causes of refugee movements and displacement

Important Links

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)621893_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/621893/EPRS_BRI(2018)621893_EN.pdf)

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