

260614 Reminder NfWW No.115 To mark Refugee Week

When we picture a refugee, we might imagine someone fleeing from war or persecution. But a growing and largely invisible crisis is redrawing that picture. This piece, to mark Refugee Week (15th to 21st June), looks at that picture.

Across the world, millions of people are being driven from their homes not by bombs and bullets, but by floods, droughts, and failed harvests amplified by climate change and by rising sea-levels.

The numbers are stark. In the first half of last year, 117 million people were displaced by war, violence, and persecution – three quarters of them living in countries facing high-to-extreme exposure to climate-related hazards.

Climate change is not separate from the refugee crisis: it threads through it.

It is estimated that over the past decade weather-related disasters have caused around 250 million internal displacements, that's roughly 70,000 every day, amongst them families in South Sudan watching floodwaters swallow their homes; farmers in the Sahel whose land has turned to dust, and coastal communities in Bangladesh whose villages are disappearing beneath the sea.

In recent years the link between climate vulnerability and forced migration has grown very much clearer. The places now generating the most refugees are, overwhelmingly, the places most ravaged by a changing climate.

What makes this crisis particularly cruel is its injustice. Marginalised communities, despite contributing little to the burning of fossil fuels, disproportionately face the devastating effects of climate-related disasters.

When fleeing, even those who manage to reach the relative safety of refugee camps are not out of danger. The UN predicts that by mid-century many such places will be rendered uninhabitable by extreme weather events, in particular extreme heat.

And projections for the future are alarming. The Institute for Economics and Peace, a thinktank, predicts that by 2050 1.2 billion people could be displaced globally due to extreme weather and natural disasters.

We really do need to be waking up to this, and indeed some countries are. In a 2023 landmark agreement between Australia and the tiny Pacific nation of Tuvalu (which could become the first country to disappear through rising sea-levels), the very first recognised climate refugees moved from one to the other in December last year. Their numbers were small and the annual intake will be only 280 per year, as against the 3000 who applied.

But it is a start and shows how, under a properly managed scheme, climate migrants can and should be treated. Upon their arrival, the resettled Tuvaluans receive immediate access to education, Medicare, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the family tax benefit and more.

Refugee Week asks us to see the full humanity of those forced to flee. In 2026, that means recognising the climate refugee – a person failed not just by conflict or politics, but by our collective carelessness in protecting the planet. Addressing displacement means addressing its causes. There is no serious refugee policy without serious climate policy.

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