



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Climate change doom predictions of mass displacement offer opportunity, not just threat



When former British prime minister Tony Blair this week urged newly-elected Keir Starmer to cling to tight immigration controls to take the steam out of rightwing populism, was he uttering a truism or is there another way?

Migration not only causes headaches for the British Labour party but also centrist and liberal parties around the world and is not made easier by forecasts of up 1.2 billion people displaced by climate change by 2050. But a debate currently conducted mostly by academics, military experts and human rights groups is generating some answers.

Voices on the left as well as the right have pounced on pronouncements about climate change doom causing a “mass exodus on a biblical scale,” **said** Antonio Guterres, UN secretary-general, last year.

While some people hope a sense of urgency will lead to concrete action to reduce carbon emissions, others see an argument to shut down borders and retreat into nationalism.

Climate migrant

Forecasts of mass climate migration are “inherently flawed,” said an authoritative paper in the journal *Nature Climate Change* back in 2019. The flaws are many but a big one is that it is often impossible to define a person who moves home because of climate change as opposed to many other push factors, such as conflict, instability and poor economic prospects.

Furthermore, the vast majority of people most affected by the changing climate move within their own country or if they do cross a border, they stay within their own region. Many people cannot move for lack of funds or other reasons and they are known as “trapped” populations.

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The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) prefers to use the term “climate migrant” as opposed to the more loaded expression “climate refugee” often used by headline writers.

The “term ‘climate refugee’ is not endorsed by UNHCR, and it is more accurate to refer to ‘persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change,’” it says.

The heated debate over definitions that has been taking place for several years matters because successful politicians use emotive language to sway voters, sometimes down xenophobic paths.

The term “environmental migrant” suggests an element of choice in deciding to move while “environmentally/climate displaced person” does not imply the responsibility of states towards them, said a 2023 European Parliament **briefing paper** “The concept of ‘climate refugee’: Towards a possible definition”.

Refugee conventions could be weakened

UN officials say refugee conventions could be weakened because of the difficulty in proving that displacement was caused by climate when, for example, weak rains over a number of seasons make agriculture impossible as opposed to a single event such as a devastating hurricane.

Nonetheless, Human Rights Watch on 2 July **urged** the US Congress to expand protection for people displaced in the context of climate-related events and to “amend US asylum law to extend protection to people who face real risk of serious harm to life or physical integrity in

such circumstances, even if the perpetrator or cause of that harm is not seeking to persecute them.”

In international law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that a person cannot be returned to a country where they would be in danger of persecution.

International agreements are reviewed all the time and doing so to meet climate change challenges would be no different - Cristina-Ioana Dragomir

In December 2023, the International Refugee Assistance Project, Refugees International and others filed a brief at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights arguing that states are obligated to protect populations before and after displacement occurs.

International agreements are reviewed all the time and doing so to meet climate change challenges would be no different, **argues** Cristina-Ioana Dragomir, a professor at New York University. “Being mindful of the multilayered challenges of slow-onset climate change could help develop a spectrum of strategies, intertwining migration management, refugee protection, and environmental solutions for those who stay and/or return,” she wrote in Al Jazeera on 2 March.

Migration can reduce conflict

There is consensus that climate change is impacting people now, causing over half of new displacements in 2023 with some 26.4 million forced to move by extreme weather, including flood and droughts. About five million people have been displaced in the US alone because of climate disasters since 2017.

But more Europeans say reducing immigration is a bigger priority than fighting climate change, according to a survey by the Denmark-based Alliance of Democracies Foundation

think tank published in May.



Migration can relieve security pressures from humanitarian crises and reduce conflict - Tom Ellison

Responsible politicians navigating through these tricky issues while keeping an eye on populist rivals may be heartened by other research by the London School of Economics showing that exposure to extreme weather increases public support for climate migrants.

Military experts who have viewed the climate debate through a security lens are also advocating different tactics to garner public support for positive action.

Instead of viewing climate change as a “threat multiplier” because of the risks it poses to food and other resources, it could be a “peace multiplier,” **says** Sherri Goodman, a former US first deputy undersecretary of defence and now at the Wilson Centre think tank.

Environmental peace-building required education and awareness, mitigation, adaptation and reimagining global cooperation, she said in a 3 July speech.

The security problem with climate migration is not migrants but their “exploitation, politicisation and abuse,” says Tom Ellison, deputy director of the US Center for Climate and Security. Migration can relieve security pressures from humanitarian crises and reduce conflict, he argues.

“The primary need identified by [a] group of mostly defence, intelligence, and diplomacy veterans wasn’t more resilient naval bases or a military buildup in the melting Arctic, and

certainly not just stronger border enforcement,” he recently wrote. “It was a more humane, flexible, and accommodating global migration system.”