



CLIMATE REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN

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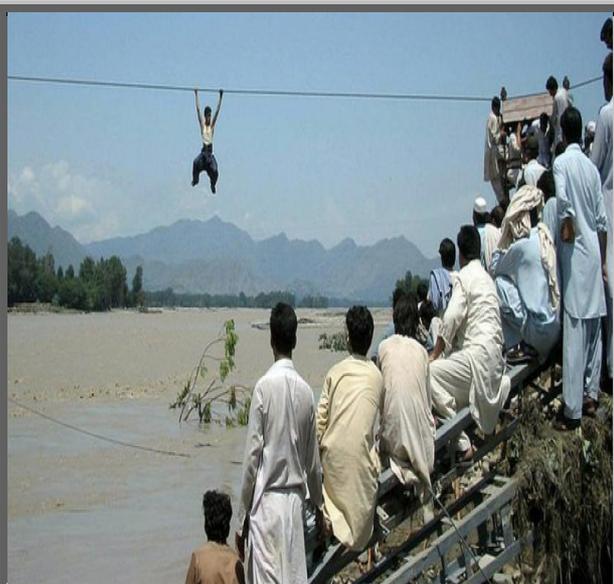
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In 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that the greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration, with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding, and agricultural disruption. Since then, various analysts have tried to put numbers on future flows of climate migrants sometimes called climate refugees, the most widely repeated prediction being 200 million by 2050.¹

The 6th IPCC report, released in 2021 has also issued an ominous warning for the global community, its forecasts for South Asia are particularly troubling. Overall, South Asian countries are predicted to see increasingly hot weather, longer monsoon seasons, alongside severe droughts over the next 20 years, as global warming increases by around 1.5 degrees Celsius.²

The results from Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration Report published by the World Bank in 2021, across the world show that without early and concerted climate and development action, as many as 216 million people could move within their own countries due to slow-onset climate change impacts by 2050. They will migrate from areas with lower water availability and crop productivity and from areas affected by sea-level rise and storm surges.

¹ Oli Brown, "Migration and Climate Change," IPCC, https://www.ipcc.ch/apps/njlite/srex/njlite_download.php?id=5866

² "AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis," IPCC, August 9, 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>

Hotspots of internal climate migration could emerge as early as 2030 and continue to spread and intensify by 2050.³

A report by ActionAid International and Climate Action Network South Asia published in December 2020, revealed that in the past few decades, more than 18 million people in South Asia have been forced to migrate due to climate change. By 2050, up to 63 million people could be displaced because of it. Many of these environmental migrants are from Pakistan, which has been hit hard by climate change. Environmental change and disasters have always been major drivers of migration in the country be it the earthquake of 2005 or floods in 2010.⁴

Pakistan is placed eighth on the list of countries vulnerable to climate change by the Global Climate Risk Index for 2021.⁵ It is annually losing more than \$4 billion due to climate change disasters. According to a report released by Pakistan's Ministry of Climate Change, the country lost \$80 billion from 1996 to 2016 because of climate change calamities.⁶ This is mainly caused by floods and heat stress, which force people to migrate temporarily or permanently. Forced migration hinders development in at least four ways; by increasing pressure on urban infrastructure and services, by undermining economic growth, by increasing the risk of conflict and by leading to worse health, educational and social indicators among migrants themselves. Forced climate migrants fall through the cracks of international refugee and immigration policy and there is considerable resistance to the idea of expanding the definition of political refugees to incorporate climate refugees.⁷

In the past decades, Pakistan has witnessed a drastic change in rain patterns and an increase in droughts and floods. At the same time, groundwater is rapidly depleting across the country. Northern glaciers are melting because of rising temperatures. It has triggered flooding in some areas, and subsequently shortage of water can be seen in some parts of the country. This has affected the agriculture sector and has forced thousands of people to migrate to other areas. Furthermore, more than 1.2 million acres of land in Pakistan have been invaded by sea in the past

³ Viviane Clement, "Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration," World Bank, 2021, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36248>

⁴ "Climate migration in South Asia set to treble by 2050 due to political inaction on global warming," December 18, 2020, <https://actionaid.org/news/2020/climate-migration-south-asia-set-treble-2050-due-political-inaction-global-warming>

⁵ "Global Climate Risk Index 2021," GermanWatch, January 25, 2021, <https://germanwatch.org/en/19777>

⁶ Aamir Latif, "Climate change triggers widespread Pakistan migration," Anadolu Agency, December 8, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/environment/climate-change-triggers-widespread-pakistan-migration/1667231>

⁷ S. Khan, "Is Pakistan prepared to deal with climate migration?" DW, January 4, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-climate-migration-crisis/a-56126512>

decades, leaving tens of thousands of people with no option but to migrate and search for an alternative livelihood.⁸

Also, it is important to note that socioeconomic and political factors make people vulnerable to these climate hazards, with disasters causing significant land and livelihood loss, ultimately resulting in displacement. Those who cannot, or choose not to, find new homes within their own country tend to seek refuge in places where they have existing cultural or ethnic ties. For Pakistan also, the climate change displacement is a gradual and complex process, consisting of a mix of temporary and permanent, forced, and voluntary migration. Living on the margins, the affected people have little influence on these high-level global and regional environmental and political processes.⁹

Without adequate measures put in place to deal with climate change, this growing crisis is likely to exacerbate mass climate-induced migration. These migrant flows can in turn trigger further destabilisation, placing unbearable pressure on already burgeoning megacities and causing refugees to flow across national borders, from Bangladesh into India, and from Afghanistan into Pakistan. This is particularly worrying for a country like Pakistan already among the world's 10 most water-stressed states which has been experiencing extreme weather events.¹⁰ Cognizant of the impending threat, Prime Minister Imran Khan has taken some important steps to mitigate the effects of global warming such as the launch of 10 Billion Tree Tsunami campaign and establishment of 15 national parks across the country under the Protected Area Initiative. Also, fuel standard is being upgraded to Euro 5 to check dangerous vehicular emissions. There is only so many nations with limited resources and least contribution to climate change can do to deal with the consequences of what the rich industrialized nations have been doing.¹¹

Climate change is an inevitable threat and can trigger large-scale climate-induced migration in environmentally fragile areas in Pakistan. The government would be wise to formulate relevant policies and strategies to deal with climate-induced migrants and environmental refugees. Moreover, it is at the regional level where cooperative efforts to contend with climate change must be urgently ramped up. Countries in the South Asian region need to stop shifting blame for their

⁸ Syed Mohammad Ali, "Code red for climate threats," Tribune, August 27, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2317251/code-red-for-climate-threats>

⁹ Dorien Braam, "Adapting on the move: Climate change displacement and local solutions in coastal communities in Sindh, Pakistan," IDMC, May 21, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/adapting-move-climate-change-displacement-and-local-solutions-coastal-communities>

¹⁰ ANI, "Water crisis looms large in Pakistan, may face absolute scarcity by 2040," Business Standard, March 22, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/water-crisis-looms-large-in-pakistan-may-face-absolute-scarcity-by-2040-121032200050_1.html

¹¹ Xinhua, "Pakistan determined to battle climate change for future generations," Pakistan Today, September 5, 2021, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2021/09/05/pakistan-in-bid-to-fight-climate-change-for-future-generations/>

environmental troubles on neighbouring states. Instead, it is vital to adopt a more holistic approach towards management of shared environmental assets including trans-border estuaries, rivers, and even the air.