



# Pat-MedMUNC III General Assembly

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## Environmental Refugees

There is a new phenomenon in the global arena: environmental refugees. These are people who can no longer gain a secure livelihood in their homelands because of drought, soil erosion, desertification, deforestation and other environmental problems, combined with associated problems of population pressures and profound poverty. In their desperation, these people feel they have no alternative but to seek sanctuary elsewhere, however hazardous the attempt. Not all of them have fled their countries, many being internally displaced. But all have abandoned their homelands on a semi-permanent if not permanent basis, with little hope of a foreseeable return.

In 1995 these environmental refugees totaled at least 25 million people, compared with 27 million traditional refugees, defined as people fleeing political oppression, religious persecution and ethnic troubles. Moreover, it has increased steadily thereafter as growing numbers of impoverished people press ever harder on other over-loaded environments. When global warming takes hold, there could be as many as 200 million people overtaken by disruptions of monsoon systems and other rainfall regimes, by droughts of unprecedented severity and duration, and by sea-level coastal flooding.

Of the 25 million environmental refugees in 1995, there were roughly five million in the African Sahel, where a full ten million people had fled from recent droughts, only half returning home. Another four million, out of eleven million refugees of all types, were in the Horn of Africa including Sudan. In other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, where 80 million people were considered to be semi-starving due primarily to environmental factors, seven million people migrated in order to obtain relief food. In early 2000 Sudan included eight million people who were officially considered at risk of starvation, with another six million in Somalia and three million in Kenya, as well as several million others in other countries.

While Sub-Saharan remains the prime focus of environmental refugees, there are sizeable

numbers in other regions and countries. In China with its 120 million internal migrants, at least six million deserve to be regarded as environmental refugees, having been obliged to abandon their farmlands due to shortages of agricultural plots in the wake of decades of population growth. In Mexico there are one million new environmental refugees each year. Some become assimilated in cities, and a few return home, leaving a cumulative total, as a bare minimum in 1995, of two million. Finally there are those people displaced involuntarily by public works projects, notably large dams, and increasing by ten million every year (with a cumulative total of 50 million in just China and India). Most of them resettle elsewhere, but the number remaining in a refugee-like situation totals one million. The 1995 estimate of 25 million environmental refugees is cautious and conservative. Scattered throughout the developing world are 135 million people threatened by severe desertification, and 550 million people subject to chronic water shortages. While certain of these people will have been included in the 25 million figures, many could well have been driven to migrate without being counted as environmental refugees. Let's keep in mind as well the major changes which have occurred to our world since 1995, including multiple natural disasters in recent years. The numbers are surely higher and new estimates should be pursued by the GA.

Of the nearly one billion additional people added to the global population during the 1990s, a good proportion will have been among communities with a cash income of \$1 per day or less. They include the people most likely to be subsisting, or rather struggling to survive, in environments too wet, too dry or too steep for sustainable agriculture. In Sub-Saharan Africa, these 3 environments will have needed to support an extra 150 million people during the 1990s, and a similar total in India. Poverty serves as an additional "push" factor associated with the environmental problems displacing people. Other factors include population pressures, malnutrition, landlessness, unemployment, over-rapid urbanization, pandemic diseases and faulty government policies, together with ethnic strife and conventional conflicts. In particular, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between refugees driven by environmental factors and those impelled by economic problems. In certain instances, people with moderate though tolerable economic circumstances at home feel drawn by opportunity for a better livelihood elsewhere. They are not so much pushed by environmental deprivation as pulled by economic promise. This ostensibly applies to many Hispanics heading for the United States. But those people who migrate because they suffer outright poverty are frequently driven also by root factors of environmental destitution. It is their environmental plight as much as any other factor that makes them economically impoverished. This generally applies to those refugees who migrate to areas where economic conditions are little if any better than back home, as is the case with many people who migrate within Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent. In this instance, with

poverty and "life on the environmental limits" as the main motivating force, it matters little to the migrants whether they view themselves primarily as environmental or economic refugees.

In short, there is a gradient of factors at work. At one end are those people who are driven by environmental problems outright, and at the other end are economic migrants who are voluntary opportunists rather than refugees. In between is a grey zone where one category sometimes tends to merge into the other. The assessment to date is no more than a first-cut effort, albeit preliminary and exploratory, to come to grips with a prominent and fast-growing problem that is all too real for those who endure it, however much the purists may argue about final definitions. On top of all these sub-problems is the lack of official recognition, whether on the part of governments or international agencies, that there is an environmental refugee problem at all.

There is much that developing countries themselves can do, and at no great cost. According to UNICEF (2000), to eliminate deaths from famine would cost little more than \$0.5 billion per year; to cut malnutrition among women and children (who make up a disproportionate share of environmental refugees), less than \$2 billion; and to reduce hunger among the poorest households, little over \$6 billion. All of these measures would help to reduce prime pressures generating environmental refugees. The total cost would be less than \$9 billion, or \$7 for each of the 1.3 billion people in absolute poverty--these being the communities that are a main source of environmental refugees. By contrast, developing countries spend an annual average of \$40 per citizen on military activities. In 1999 Ethiopia assigned 13 percent of GDP to this purpose, four times the global average, even while it featured some of the largest numbers of environmental refugees in proportion to population size.

### *Points to Consider*

- How much does your country assign of their GDP to this purpose?
- What percentage of your countries population is an environmental refugee?
- What is your country doing to prevent this problem?