Forum: General Assembly Fourth Committee – Special Political and Decolonization
Question of: Discussing How to Deal with Future Climate Refugees
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Dear delegates, welcome to the Fourth Committee of MUNoH. This research report will introduce you to the question of how the international community should deal with people displaced by the effects of climate change, now and in the future, and will give you the background you need to research further, form a national position, and prepare your working documents. Please read this report carefully and follow up with your own research using the sources and links provided at the end. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact your Student Officer.

I. Description of the Issue

Climate change is no longer only an environmental problem; it has become one of the defining drivers of human displacement in the twenty-first century. Rising sea levels, more frequent and more intense storms, prolonged droughts, floods, wildfires, and slow-onset processes such as desertification and glacial melt are forcing growing numbers of people to leave their homes, either temporarily or permanently, within their own countries or, increasingly, across borders.

By June 2025, an estimated 117 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced by conflict and violence, and UNHCR estimates that three in every four refugees and displaced people currently live in countries facing high-to-extreme exposure to climate-related hazards. Since 2016, weather-related disasters such as droughts and floods have displaced approximately 250 million people within their own countries, an average of around 67,000 displacements every single day for a decade. The number of countries facing extreme climate-related hazards is projected to rise sharply, from three today to as many as sixty-five by 2040, meaning that the scale of climate-linked displacement is set to grow dramatically in the years ahead.

The core difficulty for the international community is that the existing legal architecture for protecting displaced people was not designed with climate change in mind. The 1951 Refugee Convention, the foundational instrument of international refugee law, defines a refugee as someone fleeing persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group. It does not recognise climate change or environmental degradation as grounds for refugee status. As a result, most people who flee their homes because of climate impacts fall into a legal grey zone: they are neither classic refugees under the 1951 Convention nor, in most cases, adequately protected by any other binding international instrument, even though they may be just as unable to return home.

This committee must therefore grapple with several interlinked questions: how should the international community define and classify people displaced by climate change; what legal protections, if any, should be extended to them, particularly when they cross international borders; how can countries already hosting large refugee and displaced populations be supported in adapting to worsening climate conditions; and how can the international community act preventively, reducing the underlying climate risks that drive displacement in the first place, rather than only responding after people have already been forced to flee.

II. Definition of Key Terms

Climate refugee / climate-displaced person

An informal, non-legal term commonly used to describe a person forced to leave their home because of the effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels, drought, flooding, or extreme weather. Importantly, this term has no formal status in international law: under the 1951 Refugee Convention, a person cannot currently be granted refugee status on the basis of climate change alone, which is why delegates will often see the more precise but less catchy term 'persons displaced in the context of climate change and disasters' used in UN documents instead.

Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

A person who has been forced to flee their home but who remains within the borders of their own country, unlike a refugee, who has crossed an international border. The large majority of people displaced by climate-related disasters to date have been internally displaced rather than displaced across borders.

Slow-onset events

Climate impacts that develop gradually over months or years rather than striking suddenly, such as desertification, sea-level rise, glacial retreat, and salinization of agricultural land. Slow-onset events are often harder to respond to politically and legally than sudden disasters like cyclones or floods, because there is no single triggering event, yet they can ultimately displace just as many people, or more.

1951 Refugee Convention

The principal international treaty defining who qualifies as a refugee and setting out the rights of refugees and the obligations of states toward them. It does not include climate change or environmental degradation among the recognised grounds for refugee status, which is central to the legal gap this committee is being asked to address.

Non-refoulement

A core principle of international law prohibiting states from returning a person to a country where they would face a serious threat to their life or freedom. A landmark 2020 ruling by the UN Human Rights Committee suggested that non-refoulement obligations could, in the future, extend to people facing an imminent, life-threatening risk from climate change, even though the individual case in question was ultimately decided against the applicant.

Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD)

A state-led international initiative, following on from the Nansen Initiative, that works to improve the protection of people displaced across borders in the context of disasters and climate change, including through its 'Agenda for the Protection of People Displaced Across Borders in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters'.

Loss and Damage

A term used in international climate negotiations to describe the unavoidable negative impacts of climate change that cannot be prevented through mitigation or adaptation. The UNFCCC's Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage includes a dedicated task force on displacement, reflecting the growing recognition of displacement as one of the most serious consequences of climate change.

Climate, Peace and Security

A framework, used among others by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, for understanding how climate change interacts with and worsens existing drivers of conflict and displacement, for example by intensifying competition over scarce resources such as water, fuel and arable land.

III. Background information

The link between climate change and displacement operates in several distinct ways. Sudden-onset disasters, such as cyclones, floods and wildfires, can displace large numbers of people within days or even hours; in 2022, for example, flooding submerged roughly one third of Pakistan's territory and displaced eight million people, including thousands of Afghan refugees already living in the country. Slow-onset processes, such as drought, desertification and sea-level rise, displace people more gradually but can be equally devastating, and are often harder to plan for because there is no single moment that triggers the displacement.

Climate change also acts as what is often called a 'threat multiplier': it does not usually cause conflict and displacement on its own, but it intensifies existing vulnerabilities, competition over resources, and social tensions. In South Sudan, repeated droughts and floods are destroying farming-based livelihoods and pushing food insecurity to emergency levels, compounding a crisis in a country already hosting over a million refugees from neighbouring Sudan alongside nearly two million of its own internally displaced people. In Haiti, climate shocks and armed conflict have converged to drive up food prices and displace over 1.4 million people, with armed groups controlling large parts of the capital and cutting farmers off from urban markets just as an intensifying hurricane season damages harvests further.

A particularly difficult feature of this crisis is repeated displacement: many people displaced once by conflict are displaced again by climate-related disasters, sometimes more than once. In the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya, around 20,000 people, many of them Somalis who had originally fled severe drought, were displaced for a second time by flooding in 2024. More than half of the world's refugee settlements are located in extreme-heat hotspots, and the fifteen hottest camps for displaced people are projected to face over two hundred days of hazardous heat per year by 2050, illustrating how climate change is compounding, rather than replacing, existing displacement crises.

Most refugees and internally displaced people originate from and live in countries that are themselves highly vulnerable to climate change and poorly equipped to adapt to it. This creates a difficult cycle: displaced populations are frequently forced to live in remote, overcrowded, or informal settlements with limited access to basic services, which leaves them especially exposed to floods, droughts, storms and heatwaves; the resulting damage to shelters, livelihoods and infrastructure then increases the risk that they will be displaced again, or that safe and durable return will become impossible altogether.

Historical background

Discussion of climate-related displacement at the international level has developed gradually since the early 2010s. The Nansen Initiative, launched in 2012, was among the first major state-led processes to specifically address cross-border displacement caused by disasters and the effects of climate change, and it laid the groundwork for the Platform on Disaster Displacement established in 2016. A significant legal moment came in 2020, when the UN Human Rights Committee ruled on the case of Ioane Teitiota, a citizen of Kiribati – a Pacific island nation at serious risk of becoming uninhabitable due to rising seas – who had sought asylum in New Zealand on the grounds that climate change threatened his life. The Committee ultimately ruled against Mr Teitiota, finding his life was not at sufficiently imminent risk, but it stated that without robust national and international action, climate change impacts could in the future expose individuals to violations of their fundamental rights if they were returned to an unsafe country, opening the door to future legal claims of this kind.

Since then, the issue has moved steadily up the international agenda, from repeated calls to action at UN Climate Change Conferences (COP25 through COP28) for the meaningful inclusion of displaced people in climate talks, to UNHCR's adoption of a dedicated Strategic Framework for Climate Action and, more recently, its Strategic Plan for Climate Action 2024–2030, which sets out the agency's goal of ensuring that increasing numbers of displaced and stateless people affected by climate change find protection, resilience and self-sufficiency by 2030.

IV. Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Small Island Developing States (e.g. Kiribati, Tuvalu, Fiji, the Marshall Islands)

These states are among the most existentially threatened by climate change, facing the prospect that rising seas could render parts or all of their territory uninhabitable within decades. They have been leading advocates within the UN system for stronger legal recognition and protection of climate-displaced people, and for ambitious global climate mitigation to reduce the scale of future displacement.

UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency)

As the UN agency mandated to protect refugees, internally displaced people, and stateless people, UNHCR has taken an increasingly prominent role on this issue, working to clarify the

international protection entitlements of people displaced in the context of climate change and disasters, supporting states in developing relevant national laws and policies, and publishing regular reports and data on climate-driven displacement trends.

Highly climate-vulnerable host countries (e.g. Pakistan, Kenya, South Sudan, Bangladesh)

Many of the countries already hosting the largest numbers of refugees and internally displaced people are themselves highly exposed to climate hazards, meaning they must simultaneously host displaced populations and cope with their own climate adaptation needs, often with limited resources. These states have consistently called for greater international burden-sharing and climate finance to support host communities.

Major greenhouse gas emitters and developed economies

Historically high-emitting industrialised states bear a particular responsibility, both for mitigating future climate change through emissions reductions and for providing climate finance, technical support and, in some proposals, expanded resettlement or humanitarian pathways for climate-displaced people. Their positions on binding legal obligations in this area have generally been more cautious than those of the most affected states.

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The UN migration agency, which works alongside UNHCR on the operational response to climate-related displacement, including through its Displacement Tracking Matrix and its assistance to communities affected by disasters, such as its ongoing support in Brazil's Rio Grande do Sul after repeated severe flooding.

Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) and the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement

The PDD is the leading state-led diplomatic platform specifically focused on cross-border disaster and climate displacement, while the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, alongside its Climate Centre, has been an influential voice highlighting the humanitarian scale of the crisis and calling for early warning systems and anticipatory action.

V. Timeline of events

- 1951 – The Refugee Convention is adopted, defining refugee status on the basis of persecution but not including climate change or environmental degradation as grounds for protection.

- 2012 – The Nansen Initiative is launched, becoming one of the first major state-led international processes to address cross-border displacement linked to disasters and climate change.
- 2015 – The Nansen Initiative's Protection Agenda is adopted, and the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) is subsequently established as its successor to carry the agenda forward.
- 2020 (7 January) – The UN Human Rights Committee issues its ruling in the case of Ioane Teitiota of Kiribati, finding against him individually but signalling that future climate-driven asylum claims could succeed if life-threatening risk can be shown.
- 2020 (January) – UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi tells the World Economic Forum in Davos that the world must prepare for 'millions' of people displaced by climate change.
- 2022 – Catastrophic flooding submerges roughly one third of Pakistan, displacing eight million people, including thousands of Afghan refugees.
- 2022–2023 – UNHCR publishes 'calls to action' at successive UN Climate Change Conferences (COP26, COP27), pressing for displaced people to have a seat at the table in global climate negotiations.
- 2023 – At the second Global Refugee Forum, governments, NGOs and other stakeholders adopt a multi-stakeholder pledge on climate action, committing to scale up climate finance and resources for refugee and host communities.
- 2024 – UNHCR adopts its Strategic Plan for Climate Action 2024–2030, setting concrete global objectives for protecting and building the resilience of climate-affected displaced and stateless people.
- 2024 – Severe flooding displaces around 600,000 people in southern Brazil's Rio Grande do Sul, including tens of thousands of refugees, while renewed floods again displace some of the same Somali refugee population in Dadaab, Kenya.
- 2025 (November) – UNHCR publishes a major report finding that three in four refugees and displaced people live in countries with high-to-extreme exposure to climate hazards, and calling on governments to integrate displacement concerns into national climate and disaster plans.
- 2025 – Haiti's displacement crisis passes 1.4 million people as conflict and an above-average Atlantic hurricane season compound one another; roughly 5.7 million Haitians face acute food insecurity.

VI. Previous attempts to solve the issue

To date, the international community's response to climate-related displacement has relied heavily on 'soft law' instruments, voluntary frameworks and operational programming rather than binding legal obligations. The Nansen Initiative and its successor, the Platform on Disaster Displacement, have produced influential guidance, most notably the 'Agenda for the Protection of People Displaced Across Borders in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters', but this agenda is not legally binding on states and depends on voluntary adoption of its recommendations into national law and policy.

UNHCR has pursued a strategy of building the evidentiary and legal case for protection gradually, including by promoting a clearer understanding of existing human rights obligations, such as the principle of non-refoulement, that may already apply to some climate-displaced people even without a new treaty. Its Strategic Plan for Climate Action 2024–2030 focuses on four practical objectives: effective protection for people fleeing climate-related human rights violations, sustainable resource access for displaced people and their hosts, strengthened resilience to withstand and recover from climate shocks, and the reduction of UNHCR's own environmental footprint.

Within the UN climate process itself, the Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage established a dedicated Task Force on Displacement in 2015, reflecting recognition within the UNFCCC framework that displacement is a significant, and largely unavoidable, consequence of climate change that requires dedicated attention alongside broader loss-and-damage finance discussions. At the operational level, UNHCR, IOM and Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies have expanded practical work in climate-vulnerable displacement settings, including climate-resilient shelter and water and sanitation infrastructure, early warning systems, anticipatory action and cash assistance, and efforts to green displacement settings through renewable energy and reforestation projects.

Despite this progress, delegates should note the clear limits of what has been achieved so far: no binding international treaty currently obliges states to grant protection or legal status to people displaced primarily by climate change, funding for climate adaptation in refugee-hosting and climate-vulnerable countries remains far below identified needs, and political will to negotiate a new binding instrument on this issue has, to date, been limited, in part because states remain divided over the scale of new legal or financial obligations such an instrument might create.

VII. Possible solutions

Delegates should consider solutions across three broad areas: legal protection, adaptation and prevention, and humanitarian response and burden-sharing, recognising that no single measure is likely to be sufficient on its own.

On legal protection, delegates could explore ways to clarify or extend existing international protection frameworks, for example through guidance on how non-refoulement obligations apply to people facing life-threatening climate risks, without necessarily requiring a wholly new binding convention, an approach that may be more politically achievable given states' divided positions on this issue. Delegates could also consider regional approaches, since some regions may be more willing than others to pilot expanded protections or dedicated humanitarian visa categories for people displaced by climate disasters.

On adaptation and prevention, delegates should consider how the international community can help climate-vulnerable countries reduce the scale of future displacement in the first place, for example through greater investment in climate-resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, and anticipatory action mechanisms that allow support to reach people before a disaster strikes rather than only afterwards. Strengthening the resilience of major refugee-hosting countries, many of which are themselves highly climate-vulnerable, should be treated as inseparable from strengthening the resilience of displaced people themselves.

On humanitarian response and burden-sharing, delegates could consider mechanisms to scale up predictable climate finance specifically earmarked for displacement contexts, building on existing initiatives such as the Global Refugee Forum's multi-stakeholder pledge on climate action and the Loss and Damage mechanism under the UNFCCC, so that the countries and communities bearing the heaviest burden of climate-driven displacement are not left to cope alone.

Delegates should ensure that any resolution grounds its proposals in the practical realities described in this report, distinguishes clearly between internal and cross-border displacement where relevant, and considers how proposed solutions would be implemented, funded, and monitored, rather than relying only on general statements of concern.

VIII. How to prepare as a delegate

As you prepare for the conference, research your assigned country's specific exposure and relationship to this issue: Is your country highly vulnerable to climate-related hazards such as

sea-level rise, drought, or extreme weather? Does it currently host large numbers of refugees or internally displaced people, and how climate-vulnerable are the areas in which they live? Has your country taken a public position on legal protection for climate-displaced people, whether through statements at the UN, participation in the Platform on Disaster Displacement, or domestic asylum policy? Understanding these details will allow you to represent your country's interests accurately and to identify likely allies and opponents in committee.

You should also familiarise yourself with the key terms explained in Section II, in particular the important legal distinction between refugees, internally displaced people, and the informal term 'climate refugee', since confusing these categories is one of the most common mistakes delegates make when debating this topic.

All delegates are obligated to write at least one draft resolution and a minimum of two, preferably three, position papers, so that all topics of the forum are fully covered. The deadline for delegates to send in their research-related documents, including position papers, is 27 August 2026 (27.08.2026). After this deadline, documents will no longer be corrected by the Student Officers, and documents submitted later than the deadline will not be considered when it comes to awards, since it is important for the Student Officers to see how much preparation each delegate has put into their research ahead of the conference. As Student Officers, we will decide on the best and most distinguished delegate, as well as the best first-timer, in this committee.

IX. Relevant UN Treaties and events

Delegates should be aware of the following legal instruments and processes, which form important background for debate on this issue:

- The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the foundational instruments of international refugee law, which do not currently recognise climate change as a ground for refugee status.
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the 2020 UN Human Rights Committee decision in Teitiota v. New Zealand, which addressed the applicability of non-refoulement obligations to climate-related risk.
- The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage, including its dedicated Task Force on Displacement.

- The 'Agenda for the Protection of People Displaced Across Borders in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters', developed through the Nansen Initiative and carried forward by the Platform on Disaster Displacement.
- The Global Compact on Refugees (2018) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), both of which reference the impacts of climate change and natural disasters on displacement and migration.
- The Global Refugee Forum multi-stakeholder pledge on climate action (2023), through which governments, NGOs and other stakeholders committed to scaling up climate finance and resources for refugee and host communities.

Delegates are encouraged to locate and review the full text of at least two of these instruments as part of their research.

X. Useful links and sources

For your research, please rely on valid and reliable sources, such as the official United Nations (UN.org), UNHCR, or other official intergovernmental and governmental websites. The following sources were used in the preparation of this report and are strongly recommended as starting points for your own research:

- UNHCR, "Climate change and displacement": https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/climate-change-and-displacement
- Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, "UN: Prepare for 'millions' more climate displaced": https://www.climatecentre.org/635/un-prepare-for-a-millionsa-more-climate-displaced/
- United Nations, "At the crossroads of crisis: How the climate crisis worsens displacement and conflict": https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/at-the-crossroads-of-crisis
- UNHCR Strategic Plan for Climate Action 2024–2030: https://www.unhcr.org/media/focus-area-strategic-plan-climate-action-2024-2030
- Platform on Disaster Displacement: https://disasterdisplacement.org/

We wish you a lot of success with your research and look forward to a productive and well-informed debate in committee.

Best regards,
Your Student Officers of GA4
Zohre Bayat