

Climate Refugees Will Vastly Outweigh Recent Migrant Numbers

Hundreds of millions will be displaced by 2050 due to climate change.

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Due to persecution, violence and wars often waged or funded by Western governments, almost 70 million people have been forced from their homes in recent years. This is a record total surpassing the 60 million uprooted during the Second World War, easily the most bloody conflict in human history. During the early summer of 1940, as the German invasion of France was reaching a remarkably swift end, 12 million refugees were on the roads of northern France bound for goodness knows where.

About three generations later, more than 16 million were displaced worldwide in 2017, and the annual trend remains on an upward curve. Tellingly, Afghanistan and Iraq have among the largest numbers of displaced people, with millions fleeing both countries throughout this century. The exoduses can be linked directly to massive blows inflicted upon Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States Armed Forces, the most powerful military of all time.

Refugee influxes into wealthy European states have sparked a seemingly great “crisis”. In Europe, Germany has accepted easily the largest number of migrants, with more than a million people arriving since 2015 – yet even this figure constitutes just over 1% of the existing German population.

Jordan, with just under 10 million inhabitants, took in during the same period about 1.3 million Syrian refugees, while tiny Lebanon (population now six million) absorbed up to 1.5 million migrants. Since 2014, about 600,000 asylum seekers arrived in Italy from Africa, risking their lives crossing the treacherous Mediterranean Sea in unsuitable craft. In recent months, however, the far-right Italian government is refusing to receive further migrants, including people fleeing countries that Benito Mussolini attacked before and during World War II, like Ethiopia, Egypt and Tunisia.

It is not regarded as a calamity by Western elites when poor Middle East nations like Jordan and Lebanon accept massive migrant numbers, placing further strain on their creaking infrastructure and shrinking resources. Many of these refugees fled a Syria in which “rebel opposition groups” were heavily supported by the West, comprising mainly of terrorists linked to organizations like Al-Qaeda.

Yet a much larger catastrophe than the above is quickly and silently approaching: Great movements of people can be anticipated as a result of unchecked climate change caused by human activity. The recent migrant numbers are a fraction of what can be expected in years

to come. A little more than a generation from now, in 2050, up to a billion people are expected to have departed countries decimated by climate change. When the 21st century reaches its end, anywhere up to two billion people could be forced from their homelands.

The pace of climate change has shocked even experienced climate experts, while mounting evidence whittles down the ever-dwindling band of skeptics. Climate analyst Katrin Meissner, of the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Australia, said in July that the speed of warming is, “much faster than anything encountered in Earth’s history. In terms of rate of change, we are in uncharted waters”.

The reality is that our planet is very delicately balanced, and any slight disruption to its methodologies – caused by humans for example – can have major, long-lasting consequences. Meissner’s co-author, scientist Alan Mix of Oregon State University, [warns](#)

“We can expect that sea level rise could become unstoppable for millenia, impacting much of the world’s population, infrastructure and economic activity”.

This is particularly worrying as most of the world’s largest cities are built on coastlines, such as New York City, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Mumbai, Shanghai, etc. In recent decades, tens of millions across the world have been leaving rural inland areas and flocking to urban coastal heartlands. Today, about 40% of all humans live within 100 kilometers of a coastline.

However, global sea levels have been rising continuously over the past century and more, linked to greater burning of fossil fuels by industrial nations. With the increasing melt of both Arctic and Antarctica at either ends of the globe, rates of sea level rise have shot up during the previous 20 years. Over the past generation, oceans have been rising twice as fast as before.



Altogether, our water levels have now climbed about 20 centimeters globally since 1850. Come the end of this century, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), anything up to a further 98 centimeter sea level rise (over three feet) can be expected – driven by a melt of the massive Greenland ice sheet, which is 1,500 miles long. The Greenland ice sheet is disappearing at a quicker rate than predicted, melting almost twice faster than it was during the late 19th century, mainly due to significantly increased summer temperatures.

Meanwhile, the greatest number of people living by coastlines are those residing in China

and India, the world's most inhabited countries comprising more than a third of the entire human population. Remarkably, about half of China's 1.3 billion citizens live alongside the country's industrialized coastlines. Over the past five decades, many millions of Chinese have [moved](#) from the country's inland regions towards the seas in search of greater commerce and rich marine pickings.

As the oceans continue their inexorable rise, where are all these coastal dwellers going to go? Erik Solheim, the UN environment chief, said recently that "we still find ourselves in a situation where we are not doing nearly enough to save hundreds of millions of people from a miserable future". Those living in Africa, the Middle East and much of Asia are enduring increasingly intolerable temperatures, droughts, floods, and so on.

Climate change is already biting hard in China, easily the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter over the past decade. Coastal cities like Guangzhou (14.5 million population) in southern China are particularly vulnerable, and last summer it was drenched under record flooding as a result of major storms, another classic symptom of climate change. Places like Guangzhou, whose population has exploded, will be hugely affected in years to come, inevitably leading to mass exoduses.

The deadly phenomenon of worsening weather events has been repeated elsewhere in China. Shanghai, on China's east coast with a population of over 24 million, was declared in 2012 as the most vulnerable big city in the world to flooding by British and Dutch scientists. If carbon emissions continue along their upward trajectory, Shanghai could be largely immersed under the Pacific Ocean by the year 2100. Yet, currently, China burns coal at a far greater level than any other country while it is also the world's largest oil importer, policies which are having serious consequences.

In a few years, China's population will be overtaken by neighboring India. Though India is a poor country with severe internal problems, its carbon emissions continue to rapidly grow at this pivotal period. India is among the biggest coal and oil consumers, now ranking as the third largest greenhouse gas producer in the world, having long since left Russia behind in fourth place. India's carbon emissions have increased by almost 10% in the past two years alone, and at this rate it will eventually overtake America in second – though in per capita terms (per person) the US is still clear of even China.

Situated along India's coastal areas are about 450 million of the nation's 1.3 billion inhabitants. Disconcertingly, the Indian Ocean is rising almost twice as fast as the global mean average. This is mainly due to the excessive heat and wind the Indian Ocean is absorbing in this region, as water expands considerably when trapping heat. The rising ocean will have serious repercussions for coastal places like Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India's most populous city with over 12 million people residing in the inner urban areas, spreading to over 20 million on its metropolitan outreaches. Within the next century, it is expected that about 40% of Mumbai will be swallowed by the rising ocean, leading to further mass departures.

This is a scenario that may well be seen time and again across the world's major cities. In the US, there are a number of low-lying urban centers along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts such as Boston, New York City, Miami, New Orleans, etc. In New York City for instance, America's most populous town (8.5 million), average sea levels have risen by over a foot since 1900. That is about twice the overall planetary rate of sea level rise during the same period.

By 2050, water levels in the New York area are expected to rise by at least another 28 centimeters (almost a foot), but perhaps approaching closer to two feet. Come 2100, anything up to a six foot sea rise may be [expected](#). With alarming climate reports building up, it is hardly surprising New York City planners are outlining major proposals to protect the metropolis from these unprecedented crises looming on the horizon.

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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