

CLIMATE CHANGE REFUGEES: CAUGHT IN THE UNDERTOW

BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER



Kiribati plead to keep greenhouse gas emissions below 350 parts per million, the magic number scientists claim will stave off catastrophic climate change. (Photo: 350.org)

Ioane Teitiota just wants a safe home where his family has a future, but his quest may set a legal precedent with global ramifications. Teitiota could become the world's first legally-recognized refugee from [climate change](#).

Teitiota comes from the small South Pacific island of Kiribati. If sea levels continue to rise as a result of climate change, in less than 100 years Kiribati will disappear under the waves. Already, flooding is forcing residents to move inland as tides breach sea walls and obliterate crops. On that basis, Teitiota has applied for refugee status in New Zealand, claiming his homeland is no longer safe. If the New Zealand court agrees, other developing countries can expect their own flood of new refugee applications.

Humans are a tenacious species — we hang on despite adversity. But there comes a point when land is simply untenable and even the most resilient community will pick up in search of greener pastures. Estimates vary widely, but the most widely-cited figure — based on [calculations](#) by Professor Norman Myers at Oxford University in 2005—is that the world could see as many as 200 million climate refugees by 2050.

In addition to Kiribati, in January of this year the [online site CNN Travel](#) listed the Maldives, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, as one of its five “urgent” travel destinations to “see it before it’s gone.” The people of the Maldives Islands are already

planning where they will go when climate change causes the sea to swallow their homes.

The African communities where we work are no strangers to drought — dry spells have been part of life for as long as anyone can remember. But now droughts in places like the Sahel region of west-central Africa, and the Horn of Africa, are striking harder and more often. There is much these communities can do to adapt, like switching to drought-resistant crops. Nevertheless, we routinely meet people on the move as arable land falls to desiccated desert.

While Filipinos dig out and rebuild from Typhoon Haiyan, scientists argue over what part climate change plays in these killer tropical storms. But Philippine government statistics since the 1940s show that the storm power in its region, as measured by wind speed, has consistently increased. Until the 1990s, the highest wind speed ever recorded for a Philippine typhoon was 275 kilometres per hour. In the 21st century, [typhoons are exceeding 300 kph](#). Undoubtedly, there will be survivors of Haiyan who decide they'd rather live somewhere less storm-prone.

The world will face a significant humanitarian challenge in coming years. The United Nations Refugee Agency, says there are currently [45 million people](#) forcibly displaced by conflict, persecution or natural disaster. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of people who need new homes, food

supplies, and livelihoods will increase by at least half, due to climate change.

The IOM, which has studied the implications of environmental migration, says large increases in forced migration will lead to increased conflict, and greater environmental destruction, as migrants burden host communities and their [resources](#).

Canada is a global destination for refugees — we took in [5,412 last year](#). Last week, the Center for Global Development in Washington, D.C., released its annual rankings of the 27 wealthiest nations on their commitment to seven areas that impact the world's poor. Canada came third in the category of migration for being a country willing to take in immigrants from developing countries. The question of environmental migration is pressing for Canada.

Canadian decision-makers are waking up to the problem. In February, the policy researchers at the Library of Parliament updated [a 2010 report](#) entitled *Climate Change and Forced Migration: Canada's Role*. The document opens with the stark line: “Climate change threatens to cause the largest refugee crisis in human history.” While the report says Canada will benefit from some of the skilled migrants we receive, we will also be faced with increased costs for their resettlement.

The parliamentary researchers note that, like New Zealand, Canada's refugee laws have no provision for those forced from their homes by the effects of climate change. However, they say that Canada has “a moral obligation to take responsibility for the effects of climate change because Canada contributed to creating the problem.”

Ironically, that Global Development report which ranked Canada third in helping migrants, also ranked us dead last on environmental measures for fighting climate change.

Whether or not Teitiota wins his case, he is the first raindrop of the oncoming storm. It's a question of when, not if, Canada sees its first environmental refugee claim. Simply denying refugee status to people like Teitiota won't make them go away, or make their homelands habitable again. We must prepare now for their arrival, and step up our game in the fight against climate change.