Report of the Secretary-General on oceans and the law of the sea, Part I: Sea-level rise and its impacts

UNHCR contribution, January 2020

The Impacts of Sea-level Rise

The recent acceleration of sea-level rise has serious direct and indirect implications for sudden- and slow-onset disaster displacement. It has devastating effects on coastal areas such as coastal erosion, wetland flooding, ecosystem disruption, and it has made the impact of extreme weather events such as tropical storms more severe, therefore increasing displacement.[1] It is reported by IDMC that between January and June 2019, more than 7 million new internal displacements were triggered by disasters that particularly affected coastal communities, such as coastal erosion in South Asia and the Pacific islands, flooding in South-East and East Africa, South and South-West Asia, and in the Caribbean. This number was forecast to reach close to 22 million in 2019, while it reached 17.2 million across 148 countries and territories in 2018.[2] Although displacement due to sea-level rise is not fully reflected in these figures, IPCC scientists estimate that associated with a 2°C warmer earth, sea-level rise could submerge the homeland of 280 million people by the end of the century.[3]

The impacts of sea-level rise are not regionally uniform. Asia and the Pacific remains the region most prone to both sudden- and slow-onset disaster displacement. For instance, more than 2 million people were evacuated from the low-lying coasts of Bangladesh due to Cyclone Bulbul in November 2019. Thousands of people in small island countries such as Fiji were evacuated due to Cyclone Sarai in December 2019. Latin America and the Caribbean region are also particularly affected by the impacts of disasters. For instance, around 70,000 people became homeless in the Bahamas in September 2019 due to Hurricane Dorian, and more than 42,000 people were displaced in the Amazonas in Brazil in June 2019 due to flooding. Thousands of people were displaced by river overflow and coastal landslides in Colombia and El Salvador in October 2019. Millions of people in the Horn of Africa and West Africa are also affected by increasingly frequent floods.[4]

Existing refugee populations are also affected by the impacts of sea-level rise, especially in coastal areas such as Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, but also in Sub-Saharan Africa climate hotspots such as Zimbabwe.[5] A number of factors linked to climate change and consequent sea-level rise, including the expected increase in forced displacement, could also result in greater numbers of people facing a risk of statelessness.

The Actions to Address its Impacts

In this context, supporting the resilience of communities vulnerable to the impacts of sea-level rise is key to reduce the risk of displacement. In some cases, the direct threat of the rising sea levels, its indirect consequences such as higher exposure to extreme events, or severely limited livelihoods options, may make some areas permanently uninhabitable. When planned relocation cannot be avoided, UNHCR provides technical advice to support States in planned relocation in order to protect vulnerable populations from these impacts through settling them in safer locations, with full respect of their rights. UNHCR, in cooperation with IOM, the Brookings Institute and Georgetown University, has developed Planned Relocation Guidelines and a Toolbox for States. For example, the agency supported Fiji to develop a national planned relocation strategy.

When displacement associated with the impacts of sea-level rise is inevitable or already occurring, UNHCR supports States to address the protection and assistance needs of the people affected as part of its inter-agency responsibilities in response to internal displacement crises. While most disaster displacement occurs within national boundaries, sea-level rise may also displace people across borders, and engage UNHCR's protection mandate. In some circumstances, they may be in need of international protection, and refugee law has an important role to play in this area. The Global Compact on Refugees, affirmed by the General Assembly in December 2018, recognizes that climate change,

[1] WMO, *WMO Provisional Statement of the State of the Climate 2019*, 3 December 2019, library.wmo.int/doc_num.php?explnum_id=10108 pp.1, 6,-8.
[2] IDMC, *Mid-year figures 2020*, 12 sept. 2019 internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/2019-mid-year-figures_for%20website%20upload.pdf
[3] IPCC, *The Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, 24 September 2019, report.ipcc.ch/srocc/pdf/SROCC_FinalDraft_FullReport.pdf pp.1121.
[4] IDMC, Internal Displacement Updates Map, internal-displacement.org/
[5] UNHCR, "UNHCR prepares to send aid to Cyclone Idai survivors in Zimbabwe", 25 March 2019, unhcr.org/news/latest/2019/3/5c9901c94/

environmental degradation and disasters increasingly interact with drivers of refugee movements. In order to better protect people displaced across borders in this context, UNHCR is an active member of the Platform on Disaster Displacement, a follow up to the Nansen Initiative. UNHCR is also a member of the UNFCCC Task Force on Displacement, which has developed recommendations to avert, minimize and address disaster displacement through identifying gaps, mapping existing policies and data, enhancing knowledge, fostering coordination and raising awareness.[6]

[6] UNHCR, www.unhcr.org/climate-change-and-disasters.html