

Displacing One Billion People

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At least one billion people will be forced from their homes between now and 2050 as the effects of climate change deepen an already burgeoning global migration crisis, predicts a new Christian Aid report.

Christian Aid was founded at the end of World War II to help deal with the millions of people displaced by the war, and has been helping displaced people and refugees ever since, so the British charitable organization says it can speak with authority about the impending crisis.

The report elaborates on the organization's fear that climate change will displace a billion people in addition to the 155 million people already displaced by conflict, disaster and large-scale development projects.

The report, 'Human Tide: The Real Migration Crisis,' calls for 'urgent action by the world community' if the worst effects of this crisis are to be averted.

Published on 14 May to mark Christian Aid Week 2007, the report warns that the world is now facing its largest ever movement of displaced people, the vast majority from the world's poorest countries.

"The impact of climate change is the great, and frightening, unknown in this equation. Existing estimates of its potential to displace people are more than a decade old and are widely disputed. Only now is serious academic attention being devoted to calculating the scale of this new human tide," the report finds.

"The danger is that this new forced migration will fuel existing conflicts and generate new ones in the areas of the world - the poorest - where resources are most scarce. Movement on this scale has the potential to de-stabilize whole regions where increasingly desperate populations compete for dwindling food and water," the aid organization warns.

This displacement is happening already, Christian Aid says, citing the deadly situation in Sudan's western region of Darfur.

"While mired in political complexity, the genesis of the appalling conflict in Darfur has been in part attributed to this very downward spiral," the aid organization said. "Let Darfur stand as the starkest of warnings about what the future could bring."

The conflict in Darfur has its roots in generations of battles over water and grazing rights in this vast, arid region.

A new round of fighting erupted in early 2003, forcing people to flee their villages. By late 2004, some 200,000 Sudanese had fled across the border to neighboring Chad and an estimated 1.6 million were displaced within Darfur, where militias killed, raped and forced hundreds of thousands from their homes, according to the UN High Commission for Refugees.

Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan politician and environmentalist who was awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, said the Darfur conflict is about who will draw sustenance from scarce resources. It is "a struggle over controlling an environment that can no longer support all the people who must live on it," she said in an interview with the "Washington Post."

Christian Aid is calling on the governments of the rich countries that emit the most greenhouse gases into the atmosphere to establish a US\$100 billion a year fund to help poor, vulnerable countries adapt to sea level rises, increasing drought and more extreme weather.

The money should be taken from existing aid budgets, the organization recommends, and should be paid in proportion to countries' carbon dioxide emissions with the most polluting countries contributing the most.

"The alternative, as this report seeks to highlight," said Christian Aid, "is a desperate situation that could destabilize whole regions - plunging them further into poverty and conflict."

The growing problem of displacement resulting from large development programs must also be addressed. Currently, there is not even agreement about whether people forced from their homes to make way for dams or roads are covered by existing codes of conduct, the aid organization points out.

Rich countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development have had their own guidelines on the impact of their funding of development projects for the past 10 years. But it is not known whether they are effective or not.

In more than one third of the conflicts that caused displacement in 2006, people were forced to flee by their own national armies or armed groups linked to the government, the report found.

Even if they are not guilty of using violence to displace people, Christian Aid reports, most governments fail to fulfil their responsibilities towards citizens who have fled conflict.

Where governments allow the outside world to help internally displaced people, most of the practical work - providing food, water, shelter and so on - is done by international and local nongovernmental organizations such as Christian Aid with its partners.

"United Nations organizations tend to coordinate work done by others, rather than doing it themselves," the report states.

Christian Aid says it does not pretend to have all the answers, but says "the solution must start with an overhaul of the current UN system for dealing with internally displaced people."

The organization points to the latest scientific research that suggests the climate is changing more quickly than was previously predicted. "In addition, because of international prevarication over reducing CO₂ emissions, the scale and speed of action needed now is greater than previously imagined," the organization says.

Christian Aid calls for a massive, international effort to reduce carbon emissions and keep global average temperature increases below 2°C, widely believed to be the tipping point beyond which the consequences of climate change become catastrophic.

But even then, the organization says climate change will cause serious disruption, especially in poor communities. —*TWNF*