

# **Making of Climate Refugees amid Ecological Disruption in South Asia**

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## **Abstract**

In the coming decades, the world will be defined by how it tackles the climate crisis. With climate disasters becoming more common and frequent than ever, the making of climate refugees has become a norm – causing economic strains of unprecedented scale and nature. Rising sea levels, droughts, desertification, torrential rains, and melting of the glaciers – will only intensify climate induced displacement all across the globe. However, the region most vulnerable to climate refugees remains South Asia. The region must collaborate as a whole to mitigate the effects of accelerated climate change, and create a robust mechanism to cater climate refugees. The international community has done little to advocate for the rights of climate refugees. These people still do not have legal protection as they are not recognised as refugees. The issue of climate displacement must be at the top agenda on all international forums. Climate change sees no boundaries. Therefore, the world community, especially South Asia, must unite to cope with the effects of ecological disruption on an urgent basis.

**Keywords:** Climate refugees, displacement, climate crisis, mitigation & adaption.

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## **Introduction**

Tackling the global climate crisis has becoming one of the most defining moments of human history. Climate change has not only caused havoc on the economic front but has also sparked a massive refugee crisis – exacerbating the existing humanitarian crisis. Climate included migration is not limited to Pakistan but is really a global phenomenon. The World Bank states that three regions; South America, Africa, and the vulnerable South Asia will create a

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whopping 143 million more climate refugees by 2050.<sup>1</sup> This will inevitably exacerbate many humanitarian crises all around the world and may lead to more people being on the move. Accelerated climate change is intensifying events such as desertification, sea-level rise, ocean acidification, fast melting of glaciers, rain pattern shifts and loss of biodiversity – which will give rise to climate refugees. This global challenge will continue to create a multitude of critical issues that we are not ready for. Mitigating the effects of this planetary issue has now become the urgent need of the hour before it is too late. South Asia, being the world's least integrated region – is at the forefront of the climate crisis. The region, already gripped with political and economic instability, is not ready for the humanitarian disaster – in the shape of climate refugees.

### **Pakistan's climate refugee dilemma**

With political instability and economic turmoil exposing vulnerable crack-lines in Pakistan's foundations, little focus or spotlight has been directed towards coping with the fast-enraging climate crisis. Natural disasters have caused economic losses with around \$3.8 billion every year, putting extreme pressure on the country's already dire economic outlook.<sup>2</sup> However, the country's most dangerous threat is now the making of climate refugees, on very fast pace. Vulnerable people residing in climate hotspots are forcibly displaced due to severe impacts generated by accelerated climate change.

In the Northern parts of Pakistan, thousands have been forced to reallocate to habitable conditions to flee from glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), which are gaining momentum due to rising temperatures and global warming. When such lakes become too full, they overflow, inevitably releasing huge volumes of water

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank, 'Climate Change Could Force 216 Million People to Migrate Within Their Own Countries by 2050', 2021.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/09/13/climate-change-could-force-216-million-people-to-migrate-within-their-own-countries-by-2050>, accessed 2 April 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Kiani, Kiani, 'Climate change to cost Pakistan \$3.8bn yearly', *Dawn*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1624382> accessed 31 March 2023.

and causing catastrophic flooding. Since the last two decades, the number of glacial lakes has increased by almost 50% all across the globe. In South Asia, a new Hindu Kush Assessment report states that more than 36% of Pakistan's glaciers are expected to disappear – sparking a huge climate migration crisis in the whole country. Another damning report by the Al Jazeera states that Pakistan is home to more than 7000 glaciers, but global warming is making them disappear. It is inevitable for GLOFs to normalise, sparking a huge climate refugee crisis.<sup>3</sup> Heatwaves are directly with flooding near the mountainous regions. In the past, disaster management authorities have failed to take proper disaster risk initiatives which have not only resulted in losses of livelihoods but also lives. With Senator Sherry Rehman, as the country's new federal minister for climate change, there is still hope that the current government would take appropriate actions to save lives and livelihoods.

In the Southern part of Pakistan, as sea levels rise on an alarming scale, small islands are fast disappearing while local communities near the coastal belt have started to fear for their existence. Keti Bundar is a small coastal town near the Indian border. It is extremely shocking that locals had no option but to switch professions from farmers to fishermen – as the land of Keti Bundar, once a thriving agriculture land, has been claimed by the sea. As salty water from the sea claims land, the availability of fresh water is on the decline as well. The Indus Delta was once known to a paradise for fresh drinking water. Sadly, locals of such coastal belts now travel more than 8-10 on a daily basis, just searching for fresh drinking water. Many residents had no option but to drink salty water, and now have serious health conditions. With all of this becoming the norm, these vulnerable communities have no option but to reallocate to safer, habitable conditions. What's more interesting here is that, this dilemma is not just evident in Southern Pakistan, but Bangladesh faces the very same problem as well.

The shrinking of the once thriving Indus Delta has forced people to move towards urban cities, away from these locations, as

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<sup>3</sup> 'Photos: Concerns as Pakistan glaciers melt', *Al Jazeera* <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2022/7/14/photos-concerns-as-pakistan-glaciers-melt> accessed 26 March 2023.

sea water makes it ways to the local towns The US-Pakistan Centre for Advanced Studies in Water at the Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro released a crucial report which states that the Indus delta has shrunk by 92% from 13,000 square km in 1833 to only 1,000 sq km now.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of sea levels, our life giving deltas are now becoming history. As deltas become history, towns and villages near these once thriving locations are now disappearing. In the end, these conditions spark a climate refugee crisis, a burden on the urban locations, which already face economic strains in today's world.

### **Bangladesh's refugee crisis**

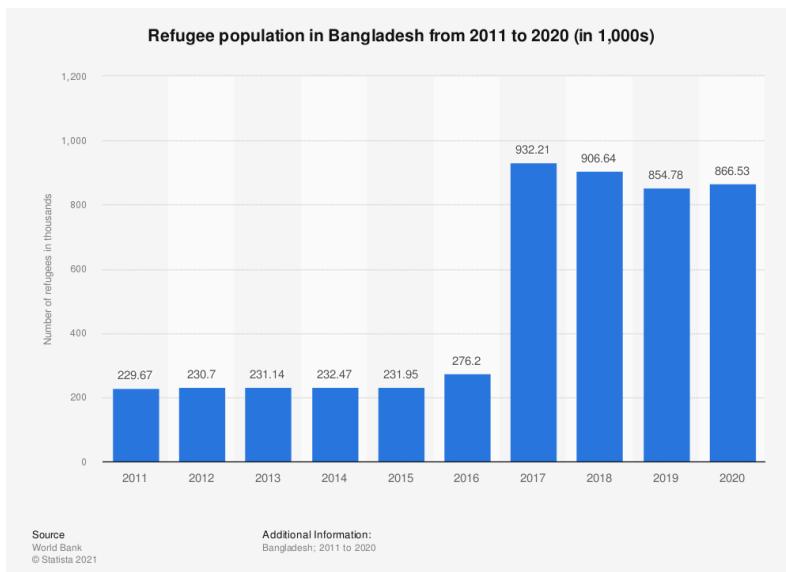
Bangladesh is Asia's next Tiger. The country's economic success has been unrivalled in recent times. However, Bangladesh remains one of the most vulnerable to accelerated climate change. New World Bank data highlights that a whopping 19 million Bangladeshi people will become climate refugees by 2050. Bangladesh has always been a victim of rising sea levels. At the same time, the country's population bulge is a massive predicament biggest for the Asian tiger. It already caters a whopping 165 million people in an area smaller than the State of Illinois in the US. It is also important to point out that in June 2020, around 7 million civilians in Bangladesh<sup>5</sup> were in dire need of humanitarian relief due to massive scale flooding and torrential rains, exacerbated by climate change. Save the Children claimed that floods had 'washed away homes, schools and livelihoods'. With uninhabitable living conditions in the Southern area of Bangladesh, millions are now moving towards the slums of Dhaka, the country's capital and financial hub. The question which arises here is that will Bangladesh's urban city manage to contain such a massive influx of climate refugees? According to the Mayors Migration Council, an estimated 2,000 people are moving to

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<sup>4</sup> Z. Ali , 'Indus delta has shrunk by 92% since 1833', *The Express Tribune* , 3 March 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1649523/indus-delta-shrunk-92-since-1833> accessed 14 April 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Shahzar, 'Climate refugees', *The News International*, 16 July 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/974043-climate-refugees> accessed 11 April 2023.

Dhaka every day.<sup>6</sup> What is more shocking is that the government of Bangladesh has predicted that every one out of 7 Bangladeshis will be displaced by the end of 2050,<sup>7</sup> if no action is taken to curtail the climate change problem.



A graph by Statista which highlights the relentless rise in climate refugees in Bangladesh

Extreme weather conditions - in the shape of torrential rains during the monsoon season - are becoming more devastating than ever. It means that the numbers of climate refugee will only witness the upward trajectory. Not to forget, Bangladesh's UNESCO sites are also facing an existential threat. Bangladesh is home to the Sundarbans, the world's largest contiguous mangrove forest, which is now under threat due to rising sea levels. When sea water takes over life giving mangroves forest, biodiversity is lost on a massive

<sup>6</sup> Yazhaou Sun, 'Climate Migration Pushes Bangladesh's Megacity to the Brink', *Bloomberg*, 29 June 2022 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-06-28/bangladesh-flooding-fuels-climate-migration-to-dhaka>, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Diego Rojas, 'How climate crisis is impacting Bangladesh', *The Climate Reality Project*, 9 December 2021, <https://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/how-climate-crisis-impacting-bangladesh>, accessed 10 March 2023.

scale. Rising sea levels is a big concern for the government of Bangladesh. Already, two-thirds of the country is less than 15 feet above sea level.<sup>8</sup>

### **Maldives: fighting for its existence**

Another South Asian country which is most vulnerable to climate induced displacement is Maldives. Located in the Indian Ocean, Maldives is the world's lowest-lying nation in the world, which indicates that rising sea levels and soil erosion threaten the very existence of the country. According to the World Economic Forum, more than 80% of the country's land area lies at less than one meter above sea level. Rising seas will force out millions to leave their homes, inevitably creating a massive climate refugee crisis. A new report from National Geographic states that Maldives will disappear due to rising sea levels exacerbated by accelerated climate change. The existing international laws are not only ill-equipped to provide protections or the much-needed relief, they also make no mention of climate change refugees. Losing Maldives to rising sea levels does not only mean the loss of a home, it also means the loss of sovereignty at the international level. Moreover, the country does not have any asylum adjudication system, as Maldives is not signatory of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The fate of this South Asian country remains unknown as climate change is expected to create a massive refugee crisis in Maldives.

### **Pressure on South Asia's already depleting water resources**

South Asia is home to nearly two billion people. The region's population is booming, putting extreme pressure on existing water resources. Major capital cities in South Asia – Dhaka, Delhi, Islamabad, Kabul and Kathmandu – are showing groundwater stress with the water table receding at an alarming rate.<sup>9</sup> It is important to mention that ground water is not only receding but

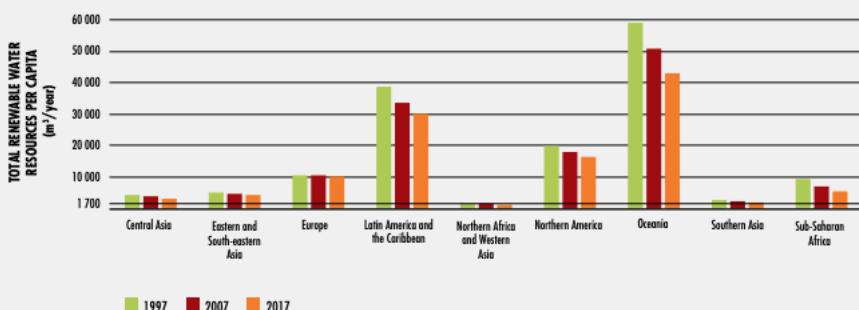
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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Vanita Suneja, 'Five ways to fix South Asia's Water Crisis', *Water Aid*, 18 July 2018, <https://washmatters.waterraid.org/blog/five-ways-to-fix-south-asias-water-crisis>, accessed 4 April 2023.

has also become contaminated. In Pakistan, 60 million people remain at risk due to arsenic ground water.<sup>10</sup> Long-term exposure to arsenic water can cause chronic health conditions, including skin disorders, cancers and even cardiovascular issue. The story in neighbouring South Asian countries is quite similar. In India, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), reports that the country's groundwater level is estimated to have declined by an alarming 61% between 2007 and 2017. With the climate crisis gaining momentum through chronic heatwaves and droughts, ground water is expected to further vanish.

FIGURE 2  
PER CAPITA RENEWABLE FRESHWATER RESOURCES BY REGION, 1997–2017



NOTES: Average renewable freshwater resources per person are measured in cubic metres per person per year. Population data refers to the World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). Oceania includes Australia and New Zealand.

SOURCE: FAO elaboration based on FAO, 2020<sup>11</sup> and UN DESA, 2019.<sup>8</sup>

### A graph which displays how South Asia's performs the worst in terms of per capita renewable freshwater resources

With rising temperatures and chronic heatwaves, intolerant environment conditions are putting more pressure on South Asia's water availability levels. In 2022, temperatures exceeded to 48°C on the border between Pakistan and India. The heat broke a 122-

<sup>10</sup> Matt McGrath, “‘Alarmingly high’ levels of arsenic in Pakistan’s ground water”, *BBC News*, 23 August 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-41002005>, accessed 25 March 2023.

year-old record.<sup>11</sup> South Asia is known to be a region thriving in the agriculture sector, which has been adversely affected to heatwaves and low water availability levels. The region's water crisis will have a major hit on its economy. According to the World Bank (WB), water crisis, exacerbated by climate change, could cost some regions up to 6% of their GDP, leading to mass-scale migration and even conflict beyond borders.

### **Accelerated climate change exacerbating the refugee dilemma**

Accelerated climate change is highly regarded as one of the exacerbating factors in climate induced migration all across the world. But South Asia is the region's most vulnerable to ecological disruption. Most South Asian countries or 750 million people in the eight countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—were affected by one or more climate disasters in just two decades.<sup>12</sup> As mentioned earlier, the world's most least integrated region is not ready to cope with the disastrous effects of ecological disruption. India and Pakistan – two nuclear armed arch rivals have not been on the same table due to the Kashmir conflict as the bone of contention. Due to this very reason, South Asia as a whole has failed to collaborate together. However, as the region remains as one of the most vulnerable to climate change, the climate refugee problem will not look at borders. A detailed study by India's Ministry of Earth Sciences states that in the coming decades India—South Asia's most populous country by far—will become far drier and hotter, with average temperatures poised to increase by nearly 4 degrees Celsius by century's end.<sup>13</sup> It will also experience longer

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Marley, 'As the planet continues to warm, how we can survive a heatwave?' *World Economic Forum*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/05/heatwave-global-warming-extreme-temperatures/>, accessed 7 April 2023.

<sup>12</sup> 'Sri Lanka, Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment', Climate Change Secretariat. 2016. National Adaptation Plan for Climate Change Impacts in Sri Lanka (2016-2025)', <https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/NAPC/Documents%20NAP/National%20Reports/National%20Adaptation%20Plan%20of%20Sri%20Lanka.pdf>. accessed 23 March 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Kugelman, 'Climate-Induced Displacement: South Asia's Clear and Present Danger', *Wilson Center*, 30 September 2022,

monsoon periods and more glacial melt. This will only intensify the climate refugee problem in India. In the last few decades, accelerated climate change has caused damage worth billions to South Asian economies. In 2009, the powerful Cyclone Aila displaced a whopping 2.3 million in India and nearly a million in Bangladesh. Pakistan's 2010 floods damaged or destroyed 1.1 million homes and displaced about 11 million people—and large numbers settled in major cities instead of returning home.<sup>14</sup>

### **South Asia's population conundrum**

Population bulge is further adding fire to South Asia's climate crisis. According to a recent report by the World Bank, the major cities in South Asia, are expected to welcome more than 200 million more residents (or about the entire population of Pakistan) by 2030<sup>15</sup>. With booming populations, a massive hit will be taken by the South Asian economies, who already face unprecedented strains due to skyrocketing inflation and extreme poverty. It is important to point out that population growth is a key driver of emissions in developing regions such as South Asia. Population strain quadruples emissions through the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, industrial agriculture, and other manufacturing processes.<sup>16</sup> It is now more than important to advocate for constructive policies that rapidly reduce those emissions and build resiliency in a fast-changing climate. Many reports confirm the fact that South Asia is the region which faces more climate calamities than any other region. In a report by Asia News Network, it is estimated that 750 million South Asians have already witnessed one or more climate change catastrophes in the

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<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/climate-induced-displacement-south-asias-clear-and-present-danger>, accessed 19 March 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> 'Climate Change Action Plan 2021-2025 South Asia Road Map', *World Bank Group*, 30 November 2021, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/36321/164599.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=true> accessed 5 April 2023.

<sup>16</sup> 'Population Pressure and the Climate Crisis', *Center for Biological Diversity*, [https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population\\_and\\_sustainability/climate/](https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population_and_sustainability/climate/), accessed 25 March 2023.

past two decades. Moreover, around a whopping 800 million South Asians reside in future climate change hotspots.<sup>17</sup>

### **Strain on food supplies in South Asia further exacerbating**

The climate crisis is exacerbating the world's food crisis which was already strained due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If little or no action is taken, millions all across the globe, especially in developing nations, will face the brunt of this massive crisis. One of the most precious crops to humanity is wheat which will be heavily affected by the climate change crisis. With nearly 700 million metric tonnes consumed annually on a global basis, wheat alone provides over 20% of the world's calories and protein.<sup>18</sup> With the making of climate refugees all across the globe, food strain is more likely to worsen, causing not only hunger and starvation but also war and conflict. To ensure food security for the predicted population of 9.6 billion people by 2050 the FAO predicts that food production must increase by at least 60% to meet the demand.<sup>19</sup> The countries in the northern hemisphere are still likely to be resilient towards saving food supplies. But the region most vulnerable remains the Southern Hemisphere. With rising temperatures and a massive population boom, food supplies will be experiencing a downward trajectory. This year, India and Pakistan experience soaring temperatures, almost reaching to a whopping 51 degrees in only March. The month of March was the hottest recorded in India in 122 years, and several heat records have fallen across the region.<sup>20</sup> A new IPCC report has raised alarm regarding the food productions in South Asia. An IPCC report states that

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<sup>17</sup> Santosh Matthews, 'South Asian Countries must join hands on Climate Change', *Asia News Network*, 27 May 2022, <https://asianews.network/south-asian-countries-must-join-hands-on-climate-change> accessed 7 April 2023.

<sup>18</sup> 'The World's Food Supply is Made Insecure by Climate Change', *UN Academic Impact*, <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/worlds-food-supply-made-insecure-climate-change>, accessed 9 April 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Zia Weise and Eddy Wax, 'Climate Change Heats Up South Asia – and Global Food Crisis', *Politico*, 2 May 2022 <https://www.politico.eu/article/climate-change-heats-up-south-asia-global-food-crisis/amp/>, accessed 20 March 2023.

crop production in South Asia is expected to decrease by 30 percent — particularly rice, wheat, and maize production. Countries in South Asia are heavily dependent in the agriculture for both - lives and livelihoods.

### **Economic uncertainty in South Asia**

Countries with poor economic conditions would find it more difficult to cope up with the climate crisis. Investing in renewable energy, revamping infrastructure, and introducing nation-wide awareness programs takes a huge financial hit. Most South Asian countries are economically struggling. Sri Lanka has become default. With rising political tensions, little attention is given to climate change. While in Pakistan, all economic indicators suggest a downward trajectory. What is more shocking is that accelerated climate change has been causing an average economic loss of a whopping \$3.8 billion on an annual basis for the past two decades.<sup>21</sup> According to a damning report by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) accelerated climate change will slash up to 9% off the South Asian economy every year by the end of this century if it maintains its fossil fuel intensive path without any course correction. Moreover, Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Assessing the Costs of Climate Change and Adaptation in South Asia report highlights that by 2050, the economy of six countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka - will lose an average 1.8% of its annual gross domestic product, rising to a massive 8.8% by 2100.<sup>22</sup> Not to forget, these countries already face economic turmoil which hampers progress.

### **National responses**

Despite political and economic instability receiving most spotlight, South Asians have formulated a number of policies and crafted

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<sup>21</sup> Salman Siddqui, 'Climate change causes \$3.8b loss', *The Express Tribune*, 14 January 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2338624/climate-change-causes-38b-loss>, accessed 2 April 2023.

<sup>22</sup> 'Climate Change Danger to South Asia's Economy', *UN Climate Change*, 19 August 2014 <https://unfccc.int/news/climate-change-danger-to-south-asias-economy>, accessed 23 March 2023.

laws to mitigate the effects of climate change and battle the climate induced displacement problem. In 2005, after the catastrophic Indian Ocean tsunami, Maldives, constructed a progressive plan to build higher ground for civilians to cope up with fast rising sea levels. For this very reason, Maldives has been declared as the city of hope.<sup>23</sup> An artificial island, with walls going up to 3 meters above sea levels is in the making, which will be able to accommodate more than 130,000 people.<sup>24</sup> Even though this progressive initiative is a practical way to tackle the climate crisis and rising sea levels, a robust regional response would carry more weight. A World Bank (WB) report in 2010 claimed that Maldives, with the current predicated rates of sea level rise, the country could easily be submerged by the end of 2100.

India, the world's largest democracy, is struggling to cater its climate displaced people. According to a new report, 14 million Indians became climate refugees in just 2020 while accelerated climate change is expected to forcibly displace a further 45 million people in India by 2050.<sup>25</sup> However, the Indian government has made progressive efforts to tackle the climate crisis through its national climate change action plan. The creative plan promotes renewable energy, smart agriculture effective water management, and relief to people effected by the climate crisis. It is important to mention that India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) ensures 100 days of paid employment every year to vulnerable labourers to help them find relief in times of climate disasters.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, India's

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<sup>23</sup> Norman Miller, 'A new island of hope rising from the Indian Ocean', *BBC Travel*, 11 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200909-a-new-island-of-hope-rising-from-the-indian-ocean>, accessed 14 April 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Nenad Jarić Dauenhauer, 'On front line of climate change as Maldives fights rising seas', *New Scientist*, 20 March 2017 <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2125198-on-front-line-of-climate-change-as-maldives-fights-rising-seas/>, accessed 25 March 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Surbhi Arul, 'India needs to recognise the rights of climate refugees', *India Development Review (IDR)*, 3 June 2022 <https://idronline.org/article/climate-emergency/india-needs-to-recognise-the-rights-of-climate-refugees/> accessed 8 March 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Rachael Godfrey and Benjamin Flower, 'Does Guaranteed Employment Promote Resilience to Climate Change? The Case of India's Mahatma

Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) has already disbursed a whopping \$10 billion to more than 50 major cities for infrastructure upgrades, inevitably strengthening cities' capacities to absorb climate migrants from rural areas<sup>27</sup>. This will be key for catering climate refugees who look at urban cities as safe havens. What is more interesting is that the Indian government is also working on creating a climate change ministry for every government department in the country. However, experts have categorically criticised Indian government's climate change projects as it lacks clarity in many key areas. Many initiatives, especially the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), was started but no clear action has yet taken place in real spirit and action.<sup>28</sup>

Meanwhile in Pakistan, a country gripped with extreme political instability, little attention has been given towards the climate crisis. The country's currency is experiencing a free fall while skyrocketing inflation has exacerbated the inequality gap among the masses. Policy makers must understand that the climate crisis is heavily interlinked with the economic turmoil. With the making of refugees, a huge strain will be felt on the already struggling economy. The country's Climate Change Act was introduced in 2017, but most of its clauses have yet to be activated. The climate change ministry's three vital sub-institutions: the Climate Change Council, the Climate Change Authority, and the Climate Change Fund have not been functional yet.<sup>29</sup> Without execution of the law in place, little progress has been made in Pakistan to tackle the climate crisis.

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Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)', *Development Review Policy*, 2017, 36. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12309>

<sup>27</sup> 'Tenth CSe Media Fellowships: JNNURM and Indian cities: Misguided Mission or Reform Blueprint', *Center for Science and Environment*, May 2010, <https://www.cseindia.org/tenth-cse-media-fellowships-jnnurm-and-indian-cities-misguided-mission-or-reform-blueprint-1619>, accessed 22 March 2023.

<sup>28</sup> [https://mohua.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/1Mission%20Overview%20English\(1\).pdf](https://mohua.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/1Mission%20Overview%20English(1).pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Eric Shahzar, 'Pakistan's climate crisis', *The News International*, 26 April 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/95332-pakistan-s-climate-crisis>, accessed 12 March 2023.

Despite Bangladesh's efforts in improving its economy for many decades and introducing progressive policies for its people, it is interesting to note that Bangladesh still doesn't have a national climate change policy in place. Its closest analogue - a climate change strategy and action plan—has struggled with budgetary and implementation challenges inside the country.<sup>30</sup> Bangladesh's International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) is doing progressive work to tackle the climate refugee problem by diverting the population load to fewer urban cities. The creative plan aims to divert people to smaller urban centres with the capacity to expand and, crucially, jobs to sustain a rapidly growing workforce.<sup>31</sup> It is a 10 year major action programme which will be mainstreamed by urban cities in a systematic fashion.

### **Role of the international community**

Despite the signing of the historic Paris Agreement in 2015 – where all countries pledged to keep temperatures below 2.0C<sup>32</sup> – no global action has been taken yet. In 2019, the emission gap report,<sup>33</sup> stated that even if countries meet commitments under the Paris Agreement, temperatures are still making its way to more than 3.0C rise, leading to even destructive climate impacts. With global warming breaking all previous records, the world's humanitarian crisis is only exacerbating, with the making of climate refugees. There have been a few international reports which urge the international community to develop a legal framework to protect vulnerable to climate displacement. Firstly, under the historic Paris Agreement of 2015, a special task force on

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Kugelman, *op.cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Kaamil Ahmed and Isabel Choat, 'Port in a storm: the trailblazing town welcoming climate refugees in Bangladesh', *The Guardian*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/24/port-in-a-storm-the-trailblazing-town-welcoming-climate-refugees-in-bangladesh> accessed 6 April 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Paris Agreement, (adopted 12 December 2015, entered into force 4 November 2016), U.N. Doc. FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev/1

<sup>33</sup> 'UN emissions report: World on course for more than 3-degree spike, even if climate commitments are met', *United Nation News*, 26 November 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1052171> accessed 10 March 2023.

climate displacement was created to ‘develop recommendations to avert, minimize, and address displacement in the context of the adverse effects of climate change’.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, a damning report of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees as part of the Global Compact on Refugees 2018 also incorporated the importance of addressing ‘prevention and root causes’ of migrant and refugee movements.<sup>35</sup>

It is also crucial to point out that G7 countries have failed to mainstream the global climate change narrative. This year in June, G7 leaders met to discuss climate change, inflation, food and energy. They failed to form a consensus on how the world’s biggest carbon emissions would halve their emissions by 2030<sup>36</sup>. Even in 2021, the G7 countries pledged to raise \$100bn a year to help poor countries cut emissions but failed to execute anything constructive. The COVID-19 pandemic had a role to play for world leaders to neglect the climate crisis for some time, but even in the post covid-19 scenario, little has been done at the international stage, with just promises and less work.

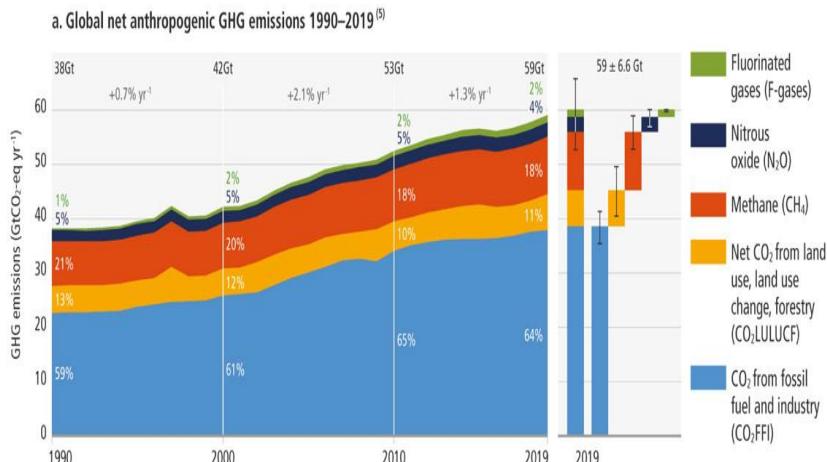
This year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC)’s damning report revealed that it is now or never to tackle the climate crisis and save the future generations. The UN’s Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has warned countries to limit their carbon emissions as the planet is on the pathway to global warming of more than double the 1.5-degree limit that was originally agreed in the historical Paris Climate Agreement back in 2016.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Event ,’Recommendations of the Task Force on Displacement’, *UN Climate Change*, 06 December 2019, <https://unfccc.int/topics/adaptation-and-resilience/workstreams/loss-and-damage-ld/workshops-meetings/cop24-side-event-recommendations-of-the-task-force-on-displacement>

<sup>35</sup> ‘Global Compact on Refugees 2018’, Report of The United Nation, High Commission for Refugees, 2018 <https://www.unhcr.org/5c658aed4.pdf> accessed 6 April 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Mathiesen and David M. Herszenhorn, ‘View from the summit: A self-defeating G7 fails on all fronts’, *Politico*, 28 June 2022 <https://www.politico.eu/article/climate-change-scloss-elmou-the-view-from-the-summit-a-self-defeating-g7-fails-on-all-fronts/>, accessed 7 April 2023.

<sup>37</sup> ‘UN climate report: It’s ‘now or never’ to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees’, *UN News*, 4 April 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115452>, accessed 2 April 2023.



Source: Obtained by the United Nations (UN) report on global emissions 2019

## International response and the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951

The international community has been advocating for tackling ecological disruption with a powerful global discourse but little has been done in practice to give legal protection to climate refugees. Under the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951, the definition of refugee does not cover those people who will be forced to flee from their homes due to climate induced migration. As of now, the Refugee Convention of 1951 protects only those fleeing war and conflict, facing persecution along grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. Therefore, the inclusion of climate refugees in the Convention not only remains a matter of protecting displaced people but is now a matter of justice and equality.

## The UNHRC's Refugee Environmental Protection Fund (REP Fund)

The UNHRC's Refugee Environmental Protection Fund (REP Fund) aims to create a sustainable financing mechanism for refugees living in climate hotspots, giving emphasis on meaningful reforestation and clean food initiatives. With corruption and mismanagement being a norm in South Asian countries, the REP fund will have more chances of transparency, as stakeholders from different sectors will have the

autonomy to scrutinize the whole process. It is important to point out that The Fund's eco-friendly initiatives would also create green jobs for climate refugees and host communities who have been living in vulnerable climate hotspots for decades.

### **Forum of SAARC for regional collaboration**

Climate crisis disproportionately impacts the most impoverished, marginalized, discriminated and disenfranchised people in our world. The people who contribute the least to the climate crisis, suffer the most. Because this vulnerable, voiceless community does not have any solid support - politicians, leaders, and policy makers in South Asia must advocate for protecting climate refugees at regional and global level. However, most South Asian countries, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Maldives are not even signatories of the current Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951. Advocating to be a part of such a crucial Convention, in the light of the climate crisis, will be a positive start. Since South Asian Association Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been on the ventilator for much long, this is indeed a golden opportunity for the region to unite to tackle the climate refugee crisis. Climate trauma sees no borders. Through the channel of SAARC, countries can share legal advice, and support each other to develop an enhanced protection plan for refugees and other people displaced in the context of disasters and accelerated climate change.

### **Conclusion**

In South Asia, ecological disruption does not get the spotlight it deserves. It is high time for a powerful region-wide climate change awareness initiative. It should not just focus on tackling carbon emission levels anymore, but more about humanity's survival. South Asia must invest in preparedness to mitigate future protection needs and prevent further climate-induced displacement on a very large scale. All South Asian countries have been gripped with political uncertainty and economic chaos but ignoring the climate crisis is not an option. The climate refugee crisis will have a direct impact on everything. Just like COVID-19 and terrorism – the climate crisis is a borderless challenge which must be countered in coordinated forums.