

KNIGHTS MODEL UNITED NATIONS INVITATIONAL CONFERENCE

U.N. HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR
REFUGEES: REDEFINING
'REFUGEE'—ADDRESSING CLIMATE
REFUGEE ISSUES



DECEMBER 7, 2024

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Greetings, dearest delegates! My name is Ariadne Georgiou, and I am positively thrilled to be your chair for this year's UNHCR committee on the climate refugee crisis. I am a junior at The Bishop's School, and I've been involved in MUN programs since 5th grade, having Vice Chaired the Chicago Law Enforcement side of the Chicago Outfit crisis committee at last year's KnightsMUN. I'm bilingual in English and Spanish, and I speak some Cypriot Greek and Irish Gaelic, and started learning Arabic this year.

Migration and refugee issues are deeply important to me. I've taken classes and summer programs on refugee law, volunteered at immigration law firms and local nonprofits, organized emergency aid efforts for migrant camps in San Diego, interned doing migration policy research, and have an entire shelf of books on the political, legal, historical, and sociological issues surrounding human migration. All that to say this committee is especially near to my heart, and I'm so excited to hear the creative range of solutions proposed by your unique perspectives.

The issue of climate refugees is a particularly complicated one that lends itself to a dramatic committee and a vast range of approaches. Like a real UN committee, we will be most successful if each of you brings your special personal interests, whether it's STEM and environmental protection solutions, legal research, historical examples, or international diplomacy, and combines those with the unique challenges and possibilities your country has to offer.

With that, I eagerly await your presence on December 7th! If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact me at ariadne.georgiou.26@bishops.com. For general position paper guidelines, please see the Position Papers tab on www.knightsmun.com.

I. BACKGROUND

After four years of living on a pile of sand and rubble behind a wall of coral and cement, with ocean waves constantly knocking down the wall and flooding his family's home, and increasingly salty groundwater making drinking water scarce, Ioane Teitiota fled his home island in the Republic of Kiribati (pronounced Ki-ri-bass) for New Zealand.¹ By 2050, due to rising sea levels, Kiribati will be so far underwater that it will be uninhabitable.² He can never return home, but unlike refugees fleeing civil war in Yemen, political persecution in North Korea, or religious persecution in Pakistan, no country is obligated to take him in. He has fallen into what the UN refugee chief has called a "legal void."³

The origins of this void lie in a resolution from a well-intentioned UN event known as the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, at which dozens of countries came together to define the term 'refugee' and created international standards for refugee protection. They concluded with one key concept known as "Non-Refoulement": the idea that no refugee should be forcibly returned to a country where their life or freedom is threatened. At the time, their intention was to set standards for human rights and ensure accountability from Western countries in protecting those who arrived on their shores. The definition they agreed on for the term "refugee" was a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country

¹ Weiss, Kenneth. "The Making of a Climate Refugee." *Foreign Policy*, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

² Wright, Emily. "The beautiful country that will be 'underwater by 2050' as all 135k locals forced to move." *Express UK*, 23 Oct. 2024, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

³ "Climate Refugees: The Problem." *Climate Refugees*, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

of [their] former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”⁴ Simply put, you are a refugee if you are fleeing war, terrorism, occupation, or persecution for your identity or beliefs. You are not a refugee (in most cases) if you are fleeing gang violence, domestic abuse, or poverty.⁵ However, the Convention did not consider circumstances in which you are fleeing natural disasters that destroy your home, desertification, ocean acidification, drought that destroys your drinking water, or rising sea levels that threaten to make your country disappear off the map. Our understanding and experience of the climate crisis was not as strong in 1951 as it is now. So many countries are starting to ask: why are we still using a definition of “refugee” that predates our scientific and social understanding of the impacts of climate change on migration?

For climate refugees, the consequences of this incomplete definition extend beyond UN issues. This standard UN definition has become the official definition for most developed countries and for many international organizations, including the European Union. When European countries are required to take a quota of refugees each year, climate refugees are not included. When a family displaced by drought, typhoons, and hurricanes that were exacerbated by climate change applies for asylum in another country, they have no legal grounds for their claim. When the world collaborates to create a modern, holistic agreement to protect refugees (Global Compact on Refugees, 2023), climate refugees are excluded from the programs and protections in the agreement.⁶

Climate change affects different countries and ecosystems in vastly different ways, but one constant is that it destroys homes and economic livelihoods. In South Sudan, experts are

⁴ United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons convened under General Assembly resolution 429 (V) of 14 December 1950. "Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees." United Nations, 28 July 1951, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

⁵ "The 1951 Refugee Convention." UNHCR, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

⁶ Woodworth, Fran. "Exclusion of Climate Migrants from the Global Compact on Refugees." *Geopolitics*, vol. 29, no. 1, 26 June 2023. Taylor and Francis, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

identifying the “First Permanent Mass Displacement Due to Climate Change”— the first of many.⁷ Extensive permanent flooding from the Nile River has destroyed crops, submerged homes, and caused outbreaks of hepatitis E, cholera, and malaria. South Sudan now has one of the largest refugee camps for internally displaced people, and their future as refugees within and outside their country is uncertain. In the Pacific Island of Tuvalu, coral bleaching due to ocean acidification is destroying ocean ecosystems and driving fish and aquatic plants to extinction, causing widespread food insecurity, and cyclones and storm surges have destroyed ecosystems and villages. More than a million people were displaced from Somalia in 2022 due to drought.⁸ The glaring reality is that these conditions will continue to worsen in the coming years, and regardless of the measures we take to slow global warming, there are inevitable mass displacements in the very near future, so widespread that they cannot be dealt with on a case-by-case basis; they require international solutions.

II. UN AND INTERNATIONAL ACTIONS + OBLIGATIONS

Twenty-three of the wealthiest, most developed countries, including the US, Canada, Japan, and much of Western Europe, are responsible for half of the world’s historical CO2 emissions. One hundred and fifty countries are responsible for the other half.⁹ In the present day, impoverished, less developed countries are facing massive destruction and displacement due to the environmental impacts of these 23 countries’ development. One major financial and moral question that the UN now faces is whether or not the countries who caused the destruction owe some kind of reparations to those who were harmed by it.

⁷ Levi, Jacob, and Liz Stevens. "South Sudan May See the First Permanent Mass Displacement Due to Climate Change." *Wired*, 14 Sept. 2024, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

⁸ Huang, Lawrence. "Climate Migration 101: An Explainer." *Migration Policy Institute*, 16 Nov. 2023, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

⁹ Huang, Lawrence. "Climate Migration 101: An Explainer." *Migration Policy Institute*, 16 Nov. 2023, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

Many of the affected countries say the primary responsibility of the top CO2 emitters is to graciously accept and settle refugees displaced by climate, or other social and political consequences of the climate crisis. Other countries have asked for support in preventing climate displacements. For example, President Taneti Maamau of Kiribati pioneered a fortification plan for the islands in 2022, intending to dig up clumps of rock and sand from the seabeds, to increase the height at which the islands stand above sea level. However, progress has been slow because the price tag on the project is in the billions, and the small stipend Kiribati received from the World Bank was not enough to fund it. Thus, President Maamau began to urge, and later demand, that the wealthy countries who had forced his nation to this point become donors to the project. “[Developed countries] should act,” he urged. He argued, “Every day counts, a delay of a day means loss to us.” He also pleaded, “I hope they [the top CO2-emitting countries] listen now, because they have to honor their commitments and pledges.” “The wealthy countries are, after all, responsible for what we are now facing,” he concluded.¹⁰

The climate-induced refugee crisis is a unique one, because it asks existential questions about the future of nations that might otherwise be stable, happy, and secure in the preservation of their culture and way of life. Many citizens of Kiribati, and many other island nations, have already migrated to Fiji, New Zealand, and Australia. Meanwhile, the government mourns the fact that they cannot secure a future for those who do continue to reside in their home country. In 2015, President Anote Tong, the former president of Kiribati, admitted to a journalist, “The biggest question we are facing is whether it makes sense to spend resources on development for a country that will be underwater.”¹¹ While wealthy countries prosper, offer their citizens luxurious

¹⁰ Milman, Oliver. “‘No safe place’: Kiribati seeks donors to raise islands from encroaching seas.” *The Guardian*, 18 Nov. 2022, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

¹¹ Cantieri, Janice. “Losing Paradise: Stories of Adaptation and Displacement Between Kiribati and Fiji.” *National Geographic*, 27 July 2015, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

lifestyles, and advance their academia, political systems, and arts and culture facilities, and other developing countries gradually work towards increased political stability, economic progress, and infrastructure for culture and research, countries like Kiribati are so existentially threatened by climate that they cannot bring themselves to spend money on a place that might not exist in a few years. The glaring unfairness of entire cultural groups being denied the chance to develop like the rest of the world makes this crisis a pressing social and cultural matter.

Despite the absence of climate refugees in the UN definition, they do have one UN action in their favor. In 2020, the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled that “people fleeing immediate danger due to the climate crisis cannot be forced to return home,” a ruling which may allow some climate refugees to be granted asylum under extreme conditions. Language like “cannot be forced to return home” is reminiscent of the principle of non-refoulement, indicating a shift in the UN towards a view of climate refugees that parallels their stance on other refugees.¹²

¹² "People Urgently Fleeing Climate Crisis Cannot Be Sent Home, UN Rules." BBC, 20 Jan. 2020, Accessed 4 Nov. 2024.

III. QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As you research the intersection of your country's perspective with your own creative solutions for the climate refugee crisis, you may wish to consider these questions:

1. How can the U.N. and the international community alleviate the impacts of the climate crisis in the nations impacted most detrimentally before mass displacement occurs?
2. Do the world's leading CO2 emitters bear responsibility for granting asylum to those displaced by their impacts?
3. In what other ways (aside from asylum and financial support) can the countries most at fault for the climate crisis compensate those who are displaced by it?
4. How can the political leaders of countries at risk work to ensure a future for their culture and lifestyles (including language, music, recipes, agricultural practices, arts and trades) amid mass displacement?
5. What scientific practices would be most effective in studying and alleviating the problems facing countries like Kiribati and South Sudan, including ocean acidification, drought, floods, rising sea levels, and groundwater salinization? (For STEM thinkers)
6. How do historic UN court rulings for or against climate refugees' asylum cases promote or deny refugee status and protections to those displaced by climate? (For legal thinkers)
7. How can your country support progress towards climate refugee protection with the resources and limits it has (ex. wealth, geopolitical location, resettlement support, signatory roles on resolutions and in UN court cases)?

IV. HELPFUL RESOURCES

- [National Geographic - Environmental Refugees](#)

- [Climate Refugees - Advocacy Organization](#)
- [UNHCR Page on Climate Change & Displacement](#)
- [European Parliament - 'Climate Refugee'](#)
- [NPR - The refugees the world barely pays any attention to](#)

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