

Climate justice and environmental refugees

This article is adapted from 'Hidden statistics: environmental refugees' which was found on <http://www.risingtide.nl/greenpepper/en/racism/refugees.html> on 24 March 2006.

The term, 'Environmental Refugees' is pretty much self-explanatory, describing populations obliged to leave their established homelands for reasons of environmental destruction, such as floods, desertification, deforestation or nuclear plant accidents.

There are officially 'only' 10 million environmental refugees worldwide. However, since many governments take little account of this 'unconventional' category of refugees, the figure of 10 million is considered a gross under-estimate by researchers in this field.

The Red Cross notes that while in 1992 they assisted less than half a million people with natural disasters, 6 years later that figure went up to more than five and a half million, indicating an extremely sharp rise in both environmental disasters and environmental refugees. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which advises the world's governments under the auspices of the UN, estimates that 150 million environmental refugees will exist in the year 2050, due mainly to the effects of coastal flooding, shoreline erosion and agricultural disruption. (150 million means 1.5 percent of 2050's predicted 10 billion world population.)

The developing world and the poor in general suffer the most from this climate change, since they have fewer options for responding to weather-triggered disasters, and are more heavily dependant on agriculture, which is the most vulnerable sector to climate change. They have, by definition, fewer resources to move, rebuild, find new jobs and to protect their health.

These environmental refugees are ecological indicators of humanity's failure to be at peace, not only with the earth, but with itself as well. They expose the existence of a racist, neo-colonialist system of resources management. The poorest people do not contribute to the problem of climate change to a substantial degree nor do they benefit financially from it, but they pay the highest price and are most vulnerable to its effects. More than 90% of all deaths from natural disasters occur in developing countries. The fossil fuel industry - coal, oil and gas - is not only the main factor in climate change, but also a prime example of the racism and social injustice of this system in which the poor both in the North and in the South suffer the consequences of the lifestyle demanded by the industrialised nations in the West.

Although well-intentioned, most proposals discussed by NGOs, the UN or particular governments concerning environmental refugees lack a thorough analysis of the problem. It is called a humanitarian issue, in which the cause is vague and faceless. At times it is simply 'nature's fault', conveniently bypassing the fact that one-hundred years of Western industrial pollution, carbon emissions and the general abuse and misuse of natural resources play the leading role in the climate changes which create environmental refugees. And where nature is not being blamed, the perpetrator seems to be an ever-abstract, unified humanity, conveniently forgetting that the ownership of the industries which cause and/or aggravate climate change is concentrated among a small minority of people.

As Western corporations and organisations, such as the IMF and the World Bank, continue to operate or finance environmentally destructive industries in developing nations for their own profit; as Western-controlled international organisations such as NATO or the WTO, continue to enforce neo-liberal, free trade and New World Order agendas; as Western-backed dictatorial puppet regimes or armed rebels carry out genocides and civil-wars in third world countries; the rich countries responsible for all this adopt tougher and stricter policies on immigration. Adding insult to injury, the millions of impoverished victims created directly by US and European countries' environmental,

economical & political practices cannot attempt to escape their misery by crossing the borders into the refuge of our first world ivory tower.

Emergency aid funds to help environmental refugees have actually dropped (40% in 5 years, claimed the Red Cross in 1999), and many insurance or reinsurance companies simply refuse to provide coverage in areas struck by environmental disasters.