

UN: World Needs to Prepare for ‘Millions’ of Climate Refugees



FILE - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi gestures as he speaks during a news conference after the First Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, Dec. 17, 2019.

DAVOS, SWITZERLAND - The world needs to prepare for a surge in refugees with potentially millions of people being driven from their homes by the impact of climate change, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said on Tuesday.

Speaking to Reuters at the World Economic Forum, Filippo Grandi said a U.N. ruling this week meant those fleeing as a result of climate change had to be treated by recipient countries as refugees, with broad implications for governments.

The U.N. Human Rights Committee made the landmark ruling on Monday in relation to Ioane Teitiota, from the Pacific nation of Kiribati, who brought a case against New Zealand after authorities denied his claim of asylum.

“The ruling says if you have an immediate threat to your life due to climate change, due to the climate emergency, and if you cross the border and go to another country, you should not be sent back because you would be at risk of your life, just like in a war or in a situation of persecution,” Grandi said.

“We must be prepared for a large surge of people moving against their will,” he said. “I wouldn’t venture to talk about specific numbers, it’s too speculative, but certainly we’re talking about millions here.”

Potential drivers include wildfires like those seen in Australia, rising sea levels affecting low-lying islands, the destruction of crops and livestock in sub-Saharan Africa and floods worldwide, including in parts of the developed world.

Whereas for most of its 70 years UNHCR, the U.N.’s refugee agency, has worked

to assist those fleeing poorer countries as a result of conflict, climate change is more indiscriminate, meaning richer countries may become a rising source of refugees.

“It is further proof that refugee movements and the broader issue of migration of populations... is a global challenge that cannot be confined to a few countries,” said Grandi.

UNHCR, whose budget has risen from \$1 billion a year in the early 1990s to \$8.6 billion in 2019 as conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria have forced civilians to flee, now assists more than 70 million forcibly displaced people globally.

Turkey is the largest recipient, with more than 4 million refugees and asylum seekers, the vast majority from Syria. That has put a strain on Turkey’s public finances and led President Tayyip Erdogan to demand more assistance from Europe.

Last November, Erdogan threatened to open the door for Syrian refugees to head to Europe unless the European Union stepped up, and is now calling for the “resettlement” of up to 1 million Syrians in the north of their homeland.

Grandi said European governments needed to think hard about solutions to the migrant crisis that has affected them since 2015 but also show more understanding of Turkey’s situation.

“We must recognize that for the past several years [Turkey] has been hosting the largest refugee population in the world,” he said. “There’s a lot of political talk. I concentrate on the substance of this, which is ‘let’s strengthen Turkey’s ability to host refugees until they can go back safely, voluntarily to their countries.’”

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