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## The problem of environmental refugees

Motion for a recommendation  
presented by Çavuşoğlu and others

This motion has not been discussed in the Assembly and commits only the members who have signed it

The number of environmental refugees worldwide varies depending on source, but a conservative estimate would claim that there are in the region of 10 million worldwide. In 1999 the International Red Cross put that figure at 25 million. More alarmingly, taking the conservative estimate as our starting point, it is expected that this will swell to 25 million by 2010 and soar to 150 million by 2050 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimate). In the light of these projections, environmental refugee migrations could become one of the greatest global demographic challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One of the major problems with environmental refugees is that they tend to come from the poor and developing countries that are heavily dependent on agriculture. In fact, more than 90% of all deaths from natural disasters occur in the developing world. There is a genuine risk that environmental refugees will be dismissed as economic migrants in the absence of any legal mechanisms to protect them.

Human rights law tends to distinguish between “refugees” who are considered to have crossed an international border, and “displaced persons” who flee or are forced to leave their homes but remain within the confines of their national borders. Somewhere in between, there is an emergent, rapidly growing and potentially destabilising number of “migrants” who have fled their homelands for reasons which broadly speaking can be attributed to environmental causes.

The Parliamentary Assembly also operates a distinction between refugees and displaced persons in its recommendations and resolutions, yet until now, it has not adopted any texts on environmental refugees.

Entitlement to the protections flowing from the granting of refugee status require asylum-seekers to have crossed an international frontier and that such persons have a “*well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion*” (Article 1.A(2), 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees). It is widely acknowledged that the Geneva Convention provides a by no means exhaustive definition of the notion of persecution, although it does provide the necessary legislative framework that European States used to institutionalise the grant of asylum. Due to its definitional inadequacies, most European states also afford subsidiary forms of protection, such as “humanitarian protection” or “temporary asylum” which are dependent on the discretionary exercise of a state’s sovereign prerogative. Similarly, the principle of non-refoulement, by which no refugee shall be expelled or returned “*in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality,*

*membership of a particular social group or political opinion*", also hinges on the existence of a life or freedom-endangering threat for the same reasons as those used to evaluate the existence or not of persecution.

Given the current climate of restrictive immigration policies for entry into Europe, the vast majority of migrants are refused entry under asylum procedures as economic migrants or, worse still, illegal or irregular immigrants. As far as environmental refugees are concerned, the risk is therefore that they will be refused asylum and other forms of protection on the grounds that there is no risk of persecution, despite the fact that their reasons for fleeing may have been and continue to be life-threatening. If this is the case, environmental refugees will fall into the residual category of migrants whose protection is dependant on temporary and episodic and charitable international aid responses.

Generally speaking, the term "environmental refugee" is self-explanatory. Yet the causes of environmental devastation leading to refugee diasporas are many and varied. They could be due to events that may, or may not, be linked to global warming, the incidence of which may be episodic or cyclical, or which manifests itself over a longer period. Such events include floods, storms, earthquakes, tsunamis, desertification, rising sea levels, crop failure and famine. However, environmental disasters may also be manmade, such as toxic contamination at Bhopal (1984), and the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl (1986), deforestation and salinisation of agricultural land, or more generally due to deforestation, environmental degradation or simply demographic pressures.

International organisations such as the UNHCR are reluctant to take on board the term environmental refugee as part of their official terminology, yet the UNEDP did set out an embryonic definition in 1985, in a report written by Essam El-Hinnawim, as "*those who had to leave their habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a potential environmental hazard or disruption of their life-supporting ecosystems*". The UK section of UNHCR acknowledges the existence of environmental refugees but stresses that there are fundamental differences between them and convention refugees which should be kept distinct, thus preferring to define them as "environmental migrants".

Definitional parameters need to be clearly defined in order to assure that individual and/ or group protection can be afforded where necessary, and to better manage responses to emergency refugee situations and humanitarian crises caused by environmental devastation.

At present, however, there is no legal compulsion for members states to recognise environmental refugees.

For these reasons, the Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to:

- i. adopt a recommendation urging member states to acknowledge the existence and scale of the problem of environmental refugees;
- ii. urge member states to refrain from classifying environmental refugees as illegal or irregular immigrants or economic migrants;
- iii. to support the elaboration of a working definition of environmental refugees to be applied by state institutions and humanitarian organisation involved in the protection of refugees;
- iv. to support the development of guidelines sensitising national decision-makers on refugee status/asylum towards the issues concerning environmental refugees;
- v. encourage dialogue between environmental and migration and demographic research centres to widen and deepen our understanding of root causes of environmentally caused migration;
- vi. promote the use of sustainable development programmes in potential "hot spot" areas where there is a risk of environmental refugee diasporas.

Signed <sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> SOC: Socialist Group  
EPP/CD: Group of the European People's Party  
ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe  
EDG: European Democratic Group  
UEL: Group of the Unified European Left  
NR: not registered in a group