

**NO ONE IS ILLEGAL**



**CLIMATE REFUGEES  
PRETEXT FOR REPRESSION?**

# CLIMATE REFUGEES: PRETEXT FOR REPRESSION?

A NO ONE IS ILLEGAL discussion paper

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## The spectre of mass immigration

A SPECTRE HAUNTS the rich countries of the West, or at least some of those who currently live in them. This is that climate change will create many millions of 'environmental refugees', who will wish to migrate to the rich countries which, through their excessive consumption and their greed, are themselves responsible for their plight.

The environmental degradation of the planet by capitalism has led to the displacement of people from their homes and livelihoods throughout capitalism's history. Currently, the vast majority of the people who are forced to migrate do so because of wars and invasion by the West, persecution by repressive right-wing regimes (supported by the West because they serve its interests), and cuts in public expenditure, privatisation and other poverty-inducing measures enforced by the World Bank and other agencies of the West (partly as a means of extracting inflated interest payments on an unjust foreign debt).

But global warming and climate change, mainly brought about by the massive generation of greenhouse gases by the rich, are adding to the pressures on people to migrate. Global warming is contributing to desertification and droughts. In combination with the scramble by Western corporations for the wealth of the Third World this has created massive deforestation, and in other places has driven people off their land or made it uninhabitable, creating deserts where there was once cultivated land, plains where animals could graze and people could live. Rising sea levels may force many millions off their land, most notably in Bangladesh. According to the World Development Movement a 4 degree centigrade rise in global temperature could lead to up to 300 million more people suffering from coastal flooding each year. Most of them are in the global South. Cities at risk include Banjul in the Gambia, Dhaka in Bangladesh and Manila in the Phillipines. A May 2009 report by the United Nations Global Humanitarian Forum says that:

The findings of the report indicate that every year climate change leaves over 300,000 people dead, 325 million people seriously affected, and economic losses of US\$125 billion. 4 billion people are vulnerable, and 500 million people are at extreme risk...

It is a grave global justice concern that those who suffer most from climate change have done the least to cause it.

Shockingly, the reaction of some people, and even of some environmentalists, to the terrible threat of climate change is to worry about the possible impacts of mass migration on the wellbeing of the current inhabitants of the rich countries. There is something astonishing in the assumption, apparently made by so many of those who argue for cutting immigration, that it is morally correct to argue entirely in terms of the self-interest of the current inhabitants of their particular bit of territory. To claim that immigration must be stopped or limited in order to protect the British environment is no different from arguing that it should be stopped, or increased, in order to protect the jobs, wages and prosperity of British capitalists and/or workers. There is an extraordinary failure to pay attention to the needs of humanity as a whole, or even the planet as a whole.

The response of the British and their governments to potential environmental disaster is likely, unless we campaign successfully to persuade them otherwise, to be to try and close their borders. If so, this will mean a huge increase in suffering. There will be more repression, more destruction of civil liberties than already exists in the viciously cruel and arbitrary system of 'tough' immigration controls, and more suffering, destitution and criminalisation of migrants and refugees. Already, for reasons probably more connected with internal racist pressures than any actual increases in attempts to migrate, the ruling class in Europe and North America are trying make their borders more impregnable. Governments not only cruelly mistreat the migrants and refugees who manage to reach this country, but, contrary to international law and their treaty obligations, they try to stop them getting here at all. Since 1993, 13,250 migrants are known to have drowned or died in other ways in their attempts to reach Europe; the actual number may be three times higher. Governments are patrolling the sea to try and stop them, forcing them into more and more dangerous routes. They make deals with regimes on other continents to get them to cooperate in preventing migration, and bribe them with 'aid'. There are new immigration prisons in most of the countries surrounding Europe, funded by the European Union, to prevent migration. The USA is building a wall along its border with Mexico.

NOII is of course utterly opposed to any such response. It would be obscene if the rich countries tried to stop people fleeing the tragedies they have themselves largely created. As Betsy Hartman points out in her '10 Reasons why Population Control isn't the Solution for Global Warming' (Different Takes, Climate Change Series, No 57, Winter 2009):

The industrialised countries, with 20% of the world's population, are responsible for 80% of the accumulated carbon dioxide build-up in the atmosphere. The US is the worst offender. In 2002 the US was responsible for 20 tons of carbon dioxide emissions per person compared to only 0.2 tons in Bangladesh, 0.3 in Kenya and 3.9 in Mexico.

Why should people living in the 'developed world' have all the 'gain' of the unfettered industries that create climate change while many millions elsewhere have to suffer the pain? This is totally unjust. Immigration controls try to protect the unjust privilege of those destroying the planet. The richer countries should not be allowed to destroy other parts of the planet whilst sitting pretty behind borders against the people displaced by their greed. The fight against immigration controls is, in part, a fight against this global injustice.

NOII campaigns against immigration controls not just for this reason, or for reasons of abstract principle, but because they are inherently cruel, unnecessary, unworkable without escalating increases in repression (and perhaps not even then), and involve massive abuses of human rights. In Britain and other countries the attempt to deny people the right to move creates huge suffering: indefinite imprisonment without trial, imprisonment of children, destitution, dawn raids, brutal treatment by often racist private security guards. There is no way in which people can be deported against their will 'fairly', or 'humanely', and the current attempts to stop them coming at all have caused, as we have said, thousands of deaths - in detention, at sea, in the backs of lorries. The abolition of controls would also be one way to counter racism, which is fed and legitimated by controls, and to prevent employers from using divisions in the working class to make all workers, and not just migrants, more vulnerable to exploitation.

## **Talk of flooding by immigration is a distraction from the real tragedy of climate change**

In addition, getting rid of controls might mean that people would be more able to concentrate on the real problems in this world, and the real causes of climate change. As most environmentalists well know, it is far more important to campaign for policies to end the potential tragedy of climate change in the world as a whole than it is to campaign against immigration to Britain, or the USA, or anywhere else. It is essential for all of humanity, and especially for the poorest in the world, for climate change to be stopped, for the economic exploitation of the poorest countries to stop, for the arrangements of the markets to suit the rich and starve the poor in the world to end.

Already the governments of the rich countries spend many billions of pounds on immigration controls, while failing to deal with homelessness and other problems which make people suffer. People are encouraged to blame the problems of homelessness, unemployment and failings in public services on immigrants. But if there has been a 'strain on resources' this has, at least up to now, had nothing to do with immigrants, who are merely made into scapegoats useful to the survival of privilege. It is the result, on the contrary, of inequality and the failures of capitalism. To take the example of housing: social housing is privatised, huge numbers of properties are left dilapidated while building workers are left idle. Blaming the problems of capitalism and climate change on immigration plays to a sense of powerlessness, paralyzing effort when we still have the power to transform and rescue the situation, and put the world on a sounder, happier and more sustainable path than before.

Similarly, even talk of 'climate refugees' is in some ways misleading. In practically all historical cases of famine, the causes are not, as is usually claimed, 'natural', the result of drought for example. Famines in Ireland, India, China and even Ethiopia occurred when there was an abundance of food, and often when food was being exported. The problem was inequality: people did not have the money to buy food. Often people are not driven off their land and out of forests by climate change; they

are driven out by the activities of loggers, ranchers and big landowners, by commercial cropping for export for consumption in the West (and to enable local elites to have foreign exchange to buy luxury goods, and debts to foreign creditors to be repaid), sometimes by tourism, sometimes even by crude 'conservation' attempts, organised by the World Bank and other agencies of the West. To say that people are turned into refugees and migrants by climate change may let the real perpetrators off the hook, even if it is recognised that it is the rich who are responsible for climate change.

## **Dubious statistics, or scaremongering**

There is, moreover, an element of scaremongering in the assertion that climate change will lead to mass immigration to Britain and other rich countries. While climate change will no doubt contribute to displacement, it is far less clear that displaced people will want, or be able, to cross continents, deserts and oceans to reach, for example, Northern Europe. The assertion that many millions of people from the global South will migrate to the rich North may simply be wrong, as many of the predictions about rising levels of immigration and population growth have notoriously been in the past. The figures on 'predicted' levels of immigration bandied around by Woolas, Kingsnorth and others (see below), for example, are figures produced by the far right anti-immigration lobby group Migration Watch, which have been shown to be full of holes and false claims. In any case the scares about population growth, and its potential effects on the environment and well-being, are frequently false. Britain is not in any meaningful sense an 'overpopulated island'; if there are problems, they are caused by the over-consumption of the rich, rather than the existence of the many (see NOII's pamphlet on population).

Even in the rich countries climate change, as well as the havoc wrought by the disasters of neo-liberalism, are likely to make life more difficult, which would make them less attractive to migrate to; Danny Dorling, professor of geography at Sheffield University, for example, thinks that Britain's problem in the future may be too few rather than too many migrants. London and its surroundings are threatened, like other coastal areas, by

rising sea levels. Already there are accounts of British citizens leaving the UK in order to take advantage of what they hope will be the greater environmental safety of New Zealand.

The effects on particular areas of the world are not well understood, researched or quantified. As Dr Camillo Boano, Professor Roger Zetter and Dr Tim Morris say in their briefing paper no. 1 on 'Environmentally displaced people' for the Oxford University Refugee Studies Programme, there is wide divergence in the estimates of the numbers likely to be displaced by climate change, let alone where they might try to migrate to. In particular, there has been little attempt to work out how many people are actually likely to migrate North. The theories about how climate change may affect particular areas, including Britain, are much contested. And powerful forces induce people, if they can, to stay where they are, and to adapt.

Above all, the sad reality is that people are likely to find it much harder to migrate than the talk of 'flooding' implies. The tragedy is, not at all that they will migrate in their millions to Europe, but that they will die in their attempt to move, or perhaps succeed in migrating to nearby, perhaps equally poor, countries (as the vast majority of refugees now do). There is a great deal of historical evidence, from previous disasters in Brazil, Ireland and elsewhere, that this is the case. Supposing, for example, that sea level rises in Bangladesh displace, as some predict, 5.5 million people. They will stay as near to their homes and support networks as they can. Some, possibly millions, will try to find security in neighbouring East Bengal. Perhaps several thousands will make it to more prosperous urban centres in India and elsewhere in Asia. Only, as now, will the exceptional few make it across continents and seas to Europe and other richer areas. They would require, as now, unusual strength, courage, and some money, to do so.

But supposing that large numbers of people succeeded in escaping poverty, wars and climate change and tried to find safety in the rich countries, and supposing even that this, unlike previous immigrations, was damaging to the economic self-interest of the current inhabitants of the rich countries, it would still be utterly wrong to try and stop them. In fact we believe that more people, rather than fewer, should be able to migrate.

## The greening of hate

Those who raise the spectre of mass immigration have a variety of motives for doing so. Some are more reputable than others. It is unclear what causes the respected environmentalist Professor Norman Myers, who has written about environmental change and population displacement for many years, to conjecture that global warming could potentially displace 200 million people, and moreover to state that:

Already there are sizeable numbers of environmental refugees who have made their way, usually illegally, into OSCE [i.e. rich] countries and today's stream will surely come to be regarded as a trickle when compared to the floods that will ensue in decades ahead. (brackets added).

Nor is it clear how his, highly conjectural, figures found their way into the 2006 Stern Review, commissioned by the UK Treasury, and thence into the mainstream of environmental thinking – although Stern seems to be mainly concerned about migration from rural areas to cities, and the figures on displacement do not reappear in his book, *A Blueprint for a Safer Planet*, published in 2009.

It is, however, very clear that there have been several attempts by racists and fascists to raise the spectre of millions of climate refugees, and to infiltrate the green movement in the USA and Britain in order to gain its support for policies against immigration. Such people have not merely embraced the arguments about flooding and swamping by mass immigration to the rich countries. They have also, more subtly, argued (in case it is pointed out that for the environment in the world as a whole it does not matter where people live) that if poor people migrate to rich countries, they might become better off and this would increase their carbon footprint. This point has been made, for example, by the Centre for Immigration, an extreme anti-immigration group in the USA. The Sierra Club, a mainstream environmental lobby in the USA, was infiltrated by right-wingers who pushed to get them to adopt an anti-immigration position, but were thwarted by a mobilisation of existing members of

the Sierra Club. Some members of the anti-immigration faction were influential and respected environmental activists like Paul Watson, Captain of the Sea Shepherd, who said:

People in the liberal camp are becoming more aware that ecological concerns are beginning to take priority over social justice issues. People are trying to advocate unlimited immigration, which is ecologically unsound.

In Britain, John Redwood, Conservative MP and ex-Minister asked in Parliament:

Does the Home Secretary accept that there must be some limit on the overall number of economic migrants every year because of the pressure on water resources, transport capacity, housing and land, or will he tell us how those problems can be solved so that we can have unlimited economic migration?

Perhaps we would expect this from a Tory but David Topple of Friends of the Earth says:

[Immigration] leads – obviously - to even more destruction of the countryside and pressure on resources of all kinds... If we have millions of people of many different races and cultures diluting each other's identities (and that on each continent of the planet and in each country) what sort of biodiversity is that? Who gains from all of this? Well, the globalisers as usual.

And Paul Kingsnorth, a prominent environmentalist, broadcaster, writer of articles for all the major newspapers and of books, arrested at Twyford Down protests, peace observer in the rebel Zapatista villages of Mexico, 'honorary member' of the Lali tribe in Papua New Guinea, who thus has a dangerous credibility, comes out backing New Labour immigration minister Woolas. In his blog of October 19 2008 he says for example:

Here's the news: new immigration minister Phil Woolas has, for the first time since Labour came to power, publicly declared that immigration levels are too high. He has linked this to the economic downturn - because there will be fewer jobs, he says, the government should make sure more of them go to British people. Also, and significantly in my view, he has linked immigration, again for the first time, to

our rapidly rising population. The UK's population is currently almost 61 million. But it's predicted to rise to a staggering 77 million by 2051 if current levels of immigration continue. Immigration is the main cause of population increase in the UK; nearly two thirds of a million people arrived here last year alone.

Therefore, say Kingsnorth and Woolas (as well as the Tories, the BNP, UKIP, Migration Watch and others), immigration (and population growth) should be stopped (or only allowed if immigration is 'balanced' by emigration). Kingsnorth et al do not specify by what brutal means these goals might be achieved.

James Lovelock (famous for his early forecasts of climate change), on the other hand, does come clean on the implications of stopping immigration. He now apparently believes that it is too late to prevent the effects of climate change making most of the world uninhabitable, and that Britain will be one of the few remaining 'lifeboat islands' where human life can be sustained. Even in Britain, he says in an article in the Sunday Times of 8 February 2009, sea level rise may cause the loss of cities and energy resources, but:

These dangers will be aggravated by the ever-growing flux of climate refugees, to which will be added returning expatriates who left the crowded United Kingdom for what they thought would be a pleasant life in Europe. Our gravest dangers are not from climate change itself but indirectly from starvation, competition for space and resources – and tribal war.

He concludes:

We need another Churchill now to lead us from the clinging, flabby, consensual thinking of the late 20th century and bind the nation into a single-minded effort to wage a difficult war... For island havens, an effective defence force will be as important as our own immune systems. Like it or not, we may have to increase the size of and spending on our armed forces.

## Suspect motivations

While it is not always clear what motivates environmentalists to raise the spectre of mass immigration by climate refugees, it is very obvious that it suits the purposes of the fascist British National Party. Thus the BNP (which uses the term ‘population growth’ interchangeably with immigration) says on its website:

The impact of population growth is already manifesting itself in many undesirable ways. Quite apart from the growing pressure on homes, education, health services, employment, social welfare, water availability, policing, energy demand, traffic congestion and the environment in general, is landfill sourcing. In the final analysis Britain’s capacity for creating rubbish is directly linked to overpopulation.

The lobbying of the small, but much quoted, pressure group Migration Watch against immigration seems to be based primarily on the argument that it will cause too great an increase in population (they recognise that immigration is in the economic interests of the British population, while claiming that the benefits are less than the government claims). Yet both the BNP and Professor David Coleman, Migration Watch’s chief researcher, argue that the solution to potential problems of declining population in Britain is for white British women to have more babies (see article by Coleman on ‘Replacement Migration’, published in the Galton Institute Newsletter, March 2001). Their motivation for scaremongering about mass immigration is based primarily on racist, eugenicist notions (see NOII’s pamphlets on population and on eugenics), rather than on any threats to the British environment. But they are not averse to making use of ‘green’ arguments. The BNP, indeed, claims to be ‘the only genuine green party’.

In the United States the Pentagon commissioned work by Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall on the threat supposedly posed by environmental refugees, entitled ‘An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and Its Implications for United States National Security’ (October 2003). Its conclusion is:

It is quite plausible that within a decade the evidence of an imminent abrupt climate shift may become clear and reliable... the United States will need to take urgent action to prevent and mitigate some of the most significant impacts... large population movements in this scenario are inevitable. Learning how to manage those populations, border tensions that arise and the resulting refugees will be critical. New forms of security agreements dealing specifically with energy, food and water will also be needed. In short, while the US itself will be relatively better off and with more adaptive capacity, it will find itself in a world where Europe will be struggling internally, large numbers of refugees washing up on its shores and Asia in serious crisis over food and water...

It is (similarly) plausible that the motivations of the Pentagon for publishing this report were its desire to make the case for more weaponry and more armed enforcement of borders.

## Resisting the politics of hate

The Green Party in Britain, not without some difficulty, has so far resisted such pressures. Although it does not call for the immediate abolition of immigration controls, and it seeks to define fair and non-discriminatory controls (which we believe to be impossible), it does have the abolition of controls as a long-term goal. Its policies on migration are far in advance of the positions of the mainstream political parties in the UK, and indeed are better than much that can be found in many of the groups to the left of the Labour Party. The Green Party's manifesto states that its vision is of a world in which conditions are such that there is less pressure to migrate, and it states that:

The existing economic order and colonialism have both been major causes of migration through direct and indirect violence, disruption of traditional economies, the use of migrants as cheap labour, uneven patterns of development and global division of labour [...] The Green Party's highest priority is the creation of a just and ecological world order in which environmental devastation is minimised and needs can be met without **recourse to migration**.

Many, probably most, environmental activists have been very supportive of migrants and refugees, and thoroughly sympathetic towards their struggles and suffering and those of other deprived and vulnerable people.

But they have a battle to fight. And we believe it is problematic that some environmentalists have lent their voice to the scaremongering about millions of potential climate change migrants. They may do so not at all because they approve of immigration controls or want more of them, but because they believe that this could be a ‘wake up call’ to the ruling classes of the world – or in other words that the threat of mass immigration would bring the impact of climate change home to where it is being caused, and make governments do something about it. Such arguments, we believe, although they are often well meaning, are dangerous. They give comfort to the racists who, like the BNP, Migration Watch, Professor Coleman, their supporters in the tabloid press and even the BBC, and apparently also David Tople of Friends of the Earth, see immigration not in reality as a threat to the environment, but primarily as a threat to something called ‘British identity’. The arguments reinforce the notion that immigration is some kind of threat, rather than something to be welcomed and supported. And, of course, if governments came to accept that climate change was forcing many millions of people to flee from areas that became uninhabitable, their response, in current circumstances, would almost certainly be merely to intensify the brutality of their immigration controls.

## **The need for radical change**

We believe that climate change will only be stopped if there are radical changes in the way society is organised. We have argued in our pamphlet on ‘socialism and immigration controls’ that to get rid of immigration controls probably requires the overthrow of capitalism. Much the same, or more, applies to saving large areas of the planet from becoming uninhabitable. It would involve changing the nature of production, getting rid of the multi-national corporations and replacing them with socially useful and planet-friendly activity. It would mean organising production on the basis of democratic decisions about what people need and want, rather than on the basis of making profits for private corporations and creating markets for their products (through advertising and through making products which have deliberately short lives and need to be thrown away at frequent intervals, and so on). It would involve a dramatic

reduction in the consumption of the rich, so as to protect and enhance the interests of the poor in the rich countries as well as in the rest of the world. It is inequality not migration which is the problem. Matthew Connelly, professor at Cornell university, suggested on the BBC's Today programme that if the British are worried about 'overpopulation' in their country, they should export the bankers and the rest of the rich, and import subsistence farmers. Getting rid of capitalism would not only be good for the environment, but has the potential to create a far superior society, one in which poverty and exploitation are eliminated and people are free to lead fulfilled and happy lives. There is an internationalist common cause to be fought for, between workers across the world.

Finally, it would of course be better if people were not forced, by the actions of the rich and their governments and corporations, to take the drastic and often painful step of migrating. There is perhaps one humane way to reduce the need to migrate. This is for the rich countries to stop making wars, to stop stealing the wealth of the rest of the world and to stop destroying the climate through their excessive consumption and greed. But nor should anybody be trapped in places where they are in danger, or do not wish to be. All of us should have the basic human right of free movement, the freedom to decide for ourselves where we wish to live and to work, and equal rights wherever we live and whatever our national origins.

There is one atmosphere. It knows no borders. Weather, climatic changes, toxins are not governed by immigration controls. We all breath from this one atmosphere but borders keep us apart and stop us addressing our common global human problems.

