

**Planning for the Inevitable, the Humanitarian Consequences of
Climate Change**
Remarks by Ambassador L. Craig Johnstone
UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees

Madame Under Secretary, I want to start by expressing my gratitude to the Government of Denmark for having taken the lead on the Global Climate Change issue and, in particular, for having put the emphasis on the humanitarian consequences of climate change. It does not surprise me that Denmark is in the lead. In the field in which I work Denmark has always been a leader.

For two long the world was consumed by the debate over whether human induced climate change was real. Once this issue was settled the debate turned to what we could do to prevent climate change and, only recently, have we come to the acceptance that no matter what we do a significant degree of climate change is a reality with which we have to live. This has launched into the debate on what we could do in the field of disaster risk reduction. That debate has progressed to the point that action plans are being formulated and put into effect. I would like to add one further dimension to the issue of climate change. Just as we can now say that we will not succeed in our efforts to prevent all the negative environmental consequences of climate change, so too we know that disaster risk reduction will not prevent all disasters and, consequently we need to prepare a third pillar in our efforts, the preparation of disaster response.

Now, because we must accept that there will be negative effects of climate change no matter what we do we should not in any way become fatalistic and diminish our efforts to reduce the effects of human activity on climate. On the contrary, we need to accelerate these efforts while simultaneously taking the steps necessary to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of what has now become inevitable and to respond to the disasters we know will occur.

I do not speak to you today as an expert on climate change. I do not speak to you as an expert in human migration. I speak to you as a professional devoted to crisis management from the vantage point of the foremost organization in the world dealing with forced displacement, emergency response and recovery from disaster.

I will also not speak to you about theory. UNHCR is a global operational organization with the vast majority of its staff located in the deep field. We are less about theory than we are about getting the job done, caring for and protecting the world's refugees and internally displaced people and coming to the assistance of those who have been forced by dramatic circumstances to leave their homes.

Our mandates related to refugees and the protection, shelter and management of internally displaced people. We are not mandated to come to the assistance of the victims of natural disasters but time and time again we have been called upon to play this role, not because it is an implied mandate but because in the face of humanitarian suffering those who can help are those who receive the call. And we have the capability to help, so we are called. We were called for the Tsunami in 2005. We were called in Pakistan in 2006, for the floods in Myanmar in early 2008 and we have

been called again in recent weeks in Yemen. In the emergencies that will be spawned by climate change we will be called again and we will have the duty to respond so, by extension, we need to be prepared to carry out this response.

Now as a crisis manager let me parse the problem:

Climate Change will impact human activity in a number of ways:

First, it will lead to changing rainfall patterns, increased desertification, and ironically for many areas, greater risks of flooding in the face of drought. This will, in most cases, adversely impact agricultural production and water availability for human consumption.

Second, we will see warming of the oceans with a result of more frequent and more dramatic weather conditions. Storms that once were categories 1 and 2 will be categories 4 and 5. And we will begin to see the rise of Super Storms with the power to dramatically impact coastal areas and areas further inland than previously known.

Third, we will see the melting of ice packs that have served to stabilize water flows across the seasons substituting instead alternate annual cycles of floods and drought.

Fourth we will see a progressive rise in sea levels that will lead to the depopulation of certain coastal areas and, at the extreme, to the potential elimination of some small island states.

Finally, in addition to these primary causes we will see a raft of secondary consequences as population groups struggle to adapt and find themselves in a competition for scarce water, food and arable land. Many parts of the world are already thrown into anarchy by the disruptive power of asymmetric warfare. Competition over resources necessary to sustain human life, will greatly exacerbate this trend.

To be sure, not all of the human impacts of climate change will be of an emergency nature. I would divide the consequences into two categories:

The predictable that can be addressed by strategies of informed adaptation, and the unpredictable that can only be addressed by contingency mitigation.

In the category of the predictable I would put the human migration that is likely to occur as a result of increases in sea level or gradual desertification. When a geographic area becomes progressively unable to sustain human activity then migration will occur, usually in the form of internal displacement. Occasionally this will involve populations who will be forced to move between states. The burden of this migration will fall to national governments, unfortunately in many cases governments that are already facing serious burdens coping with development challenges of their existing stable populations.

The responsibility for helping states to cope with these incremental responsibilities will fall primarily on the international development and international migration agencies. Only to the extent that migration results in statelessness the responsibilities

will fall under the mandate of UNHCR. But in these cases the task will be formidable involving the need to find resettlement states and to advocate on behalf of normalization of the status of the victimized populations.

More immediately relevant to the UNHCR areas or responsibility are those instances in which climate change strikes in an unpredictable and dramatic way, in the cases of catastrophic weather, or emergency conditions brought on by famine or drought. In other words, those cases in which UNHCR, among others, is called upon to assist. And, of course, UNHCR will continue to manage those circumstances in which climate change precipitates armed conflict and the creation of refugees.

What is the magnitude of these likely emergency problems? Our predictive tools are not what we would like them to be. Estimates on the total number of people likely to be displaced by climate change between now and 2050 vary from 250 million to a billion people. Let us assume, with admittedly no basis whatsoever, that we take the smaller of these two numbers. This would mean that we can assume that 6 million people a year will be displaced over that period. And let us further assume that half of these people will migrate in a predictable and evolutionary manner and the other half will move as a consequence of an emergency situation.

In neither case is the world prepared to cope with this level of human movement. National and developmental structures are not in place to assist in the predictable flow that will be precipitated by climate change and, I can assure you that the international community is not in a position to respond to the needs of three million people who have been displaced in any given year due to emergency situations. UNHCR probably has the largest rapid response capability of any of the international organization and it maintains stocks for handling up to a half a million people at any given time and could not likely handle two such emergencies in a single year.

I will leave it to the development community and IOM to determine what would be needed to enable governments to cope with the predictable dimension of the problem, both in terms of financial resource and in terms and in terms of governmental capacity. We foresee serious financial and non-financial obstacles to dealing with the issue of statelessness but these are dwarfed by the developmental consequences.

Coping with the unpredictable is perhaps even more of a challenge. Here to there is a lack of government capacity which needs to be addressed as well as substantial financial needs. We need to put in place better mechanisms for predicting storms, floods and droughts. And when the predictions are in hand we need to be able to communicate them effectively. It is instructive that much of the loss of life in the great South Asian Tsunami could have been avoided if an alert system had been in place to inform coastal residents of the impending catastrophe which was knowable in many areas a full six hours before the Tsunami struck. So too, in Myanmar that the country was going to be hit by an exceptional storm was known two days before it hit. Much more could have been done. The technologies are there; they need to be harnessed.

But beyond early warning we need contingency plans in place that have been pre-approved by governments. We need national institutions in place that are capable of responding quickly in carrying out the contingency plans. We cannot have a

situation like in Myanmar when a government fails to recognize the extent of its emergency needs or like in the U.S. where government institutions were not up to the measure of the formidable tasks brought on by recent hurricanes. .

And we need a level of international emergency response that goes far beyond what we have today. Stocks must be available and pre-positioned. Transportation plans must be mobilizable on a moment's notice. What we have done in UNHCR over the past year to build our current capability must be multiplied twenty fold if we are to be in a position to respond.

And, we will need better means of international coordination and cooperation. We have a beginning in some of the recent efforts undertaken within the UN at achieving improved coordination, such as the Cluster process. But, we need to build on these efforts, de-bureaucratize them, and exercise and game the various contingencies.

Finally we are going to have to mobilize the resources necessary to achieve both sides of the humanitarian need, the developmental and migratory needs that will stem from predictable consequences of climate change, and the emergency response needed to cope with dramatic events likely to take place. In this regard the Adaptation Fund called for under the Kyoto Protocol needs to be augmented and funded at a level that will enable it to deal with both dimensions of the humanitarian crisis wrought by global climate change. If the first priority of the Poznan and Copenhagen conferences is to get agreement on the steps necessary to prevent further environmental deterioration, the second priority should be to mitigate the consequences we already know to be inevitable. Full funding of an augmented Adaptation Fund is critical to this latter goal.

I will leave you with a final observation. We speak about the humanitarian consequences of global climate change as though we are dealing with a future possibility. Far from it, this is not a possibility or even a probability, this is a certainty. And, this is not about the future, this is about NOW. The impact of changing weather is daily upon us and growing in intensity. In the past twenty years the incidence of major storms had doubled from 200 to 400 a year. Disasters caused by flooding have risen from 50 to 200 during that period and the damage is more extensive than previously. Today we deal with conflicts in Darfur and Somalia and elsewhere in which changing climate is one of the causes. The facts speak for themselves and lend a new urgency to the issue. The future of which we speak in this conference is upon us. And like the crisis, the response is not for future years, it is for now.