

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Are We Going to See More Environmental Refugees?

Over the past few years, we have witnessed more and more unusual climate activities that have resulted in major changes in the habitat. In August 2005, as Hurricane Katrina approached New Orleans, over one million people were evacuated from the city and nearby towns. Of these people, about 700,000 returned to this area but Katrina created 300,000 environmental refugees. This evacuation and others are described in detail in Lester Brown's "World on the Edge", an excellent book that gives recommendations on how to prevent environmental and economic collapse.

While there are refugees resulting from hurricanes and other rain storms, the largest number may be derived from global warming and the subsequent rising seas. At the current rate of carbon emissions, it is expected that the sea level will rise at least six feet by the end of the century. The initial flow of refugees will be those living in the low lying river deltas. For example, a six-foot rise in sea level could displace 15 million Bangladeshis living in a densely populated delta. But the large number will really come from the major coastal cities like London, New York, Washington, Miami, Calcutta, Shanghai, Cairo and Tokyo.

The rising sea level will also affect low lying islands like Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean and the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. Of the 10,000 people from Tuvalu, already 3,000 have migrated to New Zealand seeking work. The 1200 islands that make up the Maldives are only three feet above sea level, a very dangerous situation for the 400,000 citizens, about double its population from 20 years ago. Consequently, the president of the country has set up a fund to purchase land in India or Sri Lanka as a possible new home for its people.

The warming of the atmosphere allows for a higher moisture content which means that the storms are more severe when a cold air stream meets the warm atmosphere. This is what has caused the major storms in Oklahoma and the floods in Pakistan last year. This is what also caused Katrina and other similar storms. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch hit the east coast of Central America with 200 mile per hour winds that resulted in the loss of 11,000 people in Honduras and Nicaragua. During the past ten years, there have been many destructive storms including 10 typhoons in Japan in 2004, and 15 hurricanes in the Atlantic in 2005.

Another source of environmental refugees is the growing deserts. The Sahara desert is expanding in every direction and causing populations to move. As the desert moves to the north, it is squeezing the population against the Mediterranean coast. A

2006 U.N. conference projected that by 2020 up to 60 million people from sub-Saharan Africa could migrate as far north as Europe.

A fourth group of refugees will be created as a result of the lack of water. It is projected that three billion people will be added in the next 40 years, and most will be born in countries where water supplies are already minimal. This migration of the refugees is already happening in parts of India and China. In Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, people are provided water only one day every three weeks.

The fifth category of environmental refugees first appeared about 50 years ago when people were trying to escape toxic waste or dangerous radiation. An example of this are the people that left Love Canal in the late 1970s after Hooker Chemical dumped about 21,000 tons of chlorobenzene, dioxin, pesticides and other toxic wastes. A few years later, 2,000 people were relocated from Times Beach, Missouri after waste oil containing toxic chemicals was used for dust control. The explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Kiev, Russia in 1986 required the relocation of over 350,000 people.

Unless we do something about correcting these environmental problems, we are going to see more environmental refugees. It may be more cost effective to correct the problems than to pay for the relocation of the people. This advice is directed to the governments that can effect some new policies. Perhaps the United Nations should take the lead.