

# UNHCR Welcomes Human Rights Committee's Ruling on Climate Refugee



FILE - Newly-arrived women who fled drought queue to receive food distributed by local volunteers at a camp for displaced persons in the Daynile neighborhood on the outskirts of the capital Mogadishu, in Somalia, May 18, 2019.

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GENEVA - The U.N. refugee agency welcomes a ruling by the U.N. Human Rights Committee this past week that people fleeing climate-related and natural disasters have a valid claim for international protection.



The case in question concerns Ioane Teitiota, a man from the Pacific island of Kiribati, whose claim for protection as a climate refugee was denied by New Zealand. The U.N. Human Rights Committee, which reviewed this case, agrees with that decision on the grounds that he was not at imminent risk.

Nevertheless, the committee says people should not be returned to their place of origin if it is shown that climate change is a threat to their right to life. The U.N. refugee agency hails this a landmark decision.

UNHCR spokesman Andrej Mahecic says the decision has potentially far-reaching implications for the international protection of displaced people affected by climate change and natural disasters.

“It underscores the importance of countries taking action to prevent or mitigate against harms associated with climate change, which in future could otherwise force people to leave, triggering then international obligations. And, secondly, that this ruling recognizes that the international refugee law is applicable in the context of climate change and disaster displacement,” he said.



FILE - Flames from a controlled fire burn up tree trunks as firefighters work at building a containment line at a wildfire near Bodalla, Australia, Jan. 12, 2020.

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UNHCR Special Advisor on Climate Action Andrew Harper says the fires in Australia, melting glaciers, flooding, drought, and other devastating climate-related disasters should be a wake-up call to action.

“I think the ruling can be, or the decision can be summarized by saying if we do not do more to prevent, then we will inevitably have an obligation to protect,” he said. “If we do not succeed in providing the resilience, the capacity for communities to survive this climatic catastrophe, then we will have to be doing much more on the protection front.”

Harper says it is impossible to anticipate how many people could be displaced by climate change. He notes those most vulnerable are people in small island developing states, Asia and Africa — most of whom are too poor to leave.

The UNHCR is calling for urgent action to help vulnerable communities mitigate and adapt to the changing climate so individuals do not feel forced to leave their homes.

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Source:

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