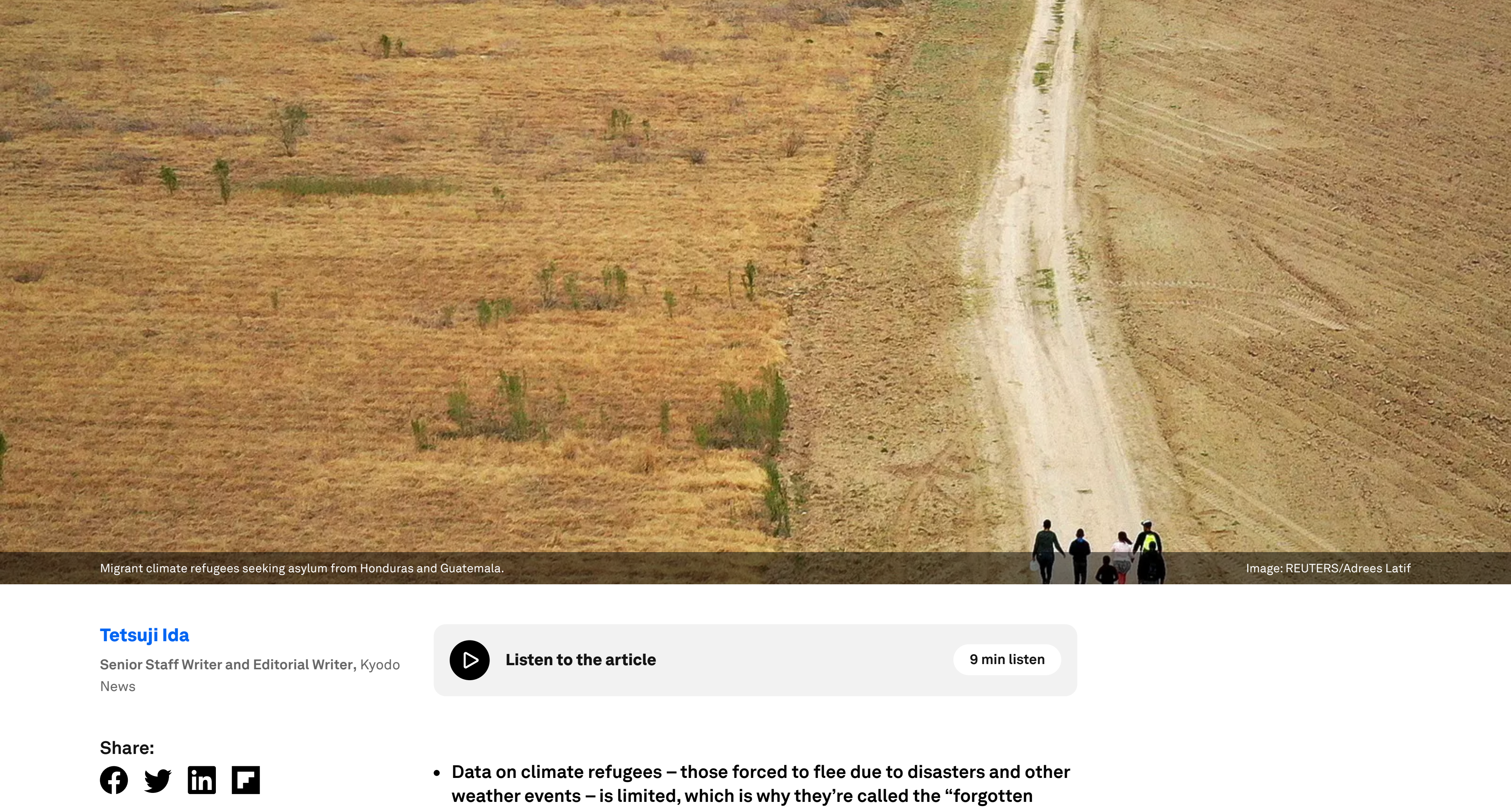


CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate refugees – the world’s forgotten victims

Jun 18, 2021



Migrant climate refugees seeking asylum from Honduras and Guatemala.

Image: REUTERS/Adrees Latif

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- **Data on climate refugees – those forced to flee due to disasters and other weather events – is limited, which is why they're called the "forgotten victims of climate change".**

- **Australian think tank IEP predicts that at least 1.2 billion people could be displaced by such climate-related events by 2050.**

- **There is an urgent need to clarify the definition of climate change refugees, including comprehensive data on IDPs, and create an international mechanism to protect them.**

As the global climate crisis worsens, an increasing number of people are being forced to flee their homes due to natural disasters, droughts, and other weather events. These people are sometimes called "climate refugees". Who are these climate refugees? And how can the international community properly address this issue?

Have you read?

- [How climate change exacerbates the refugee crisis – and what can be done about it](#)
- [Climate change is going to make the refugee crisis much worse](#)
- [Is the global refugee crisis linked to climate change?](#)

Who are climate refugees?

Today, many people in developing countries are suffering from droughts and windstorms on a scale never seen before, depriving them of daily food and basic needs. It is still fresh in our memories that last November many people from the Central American countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, which were hit by two massive hurricanes, poured across the border into Mexico and headed toward the US border.

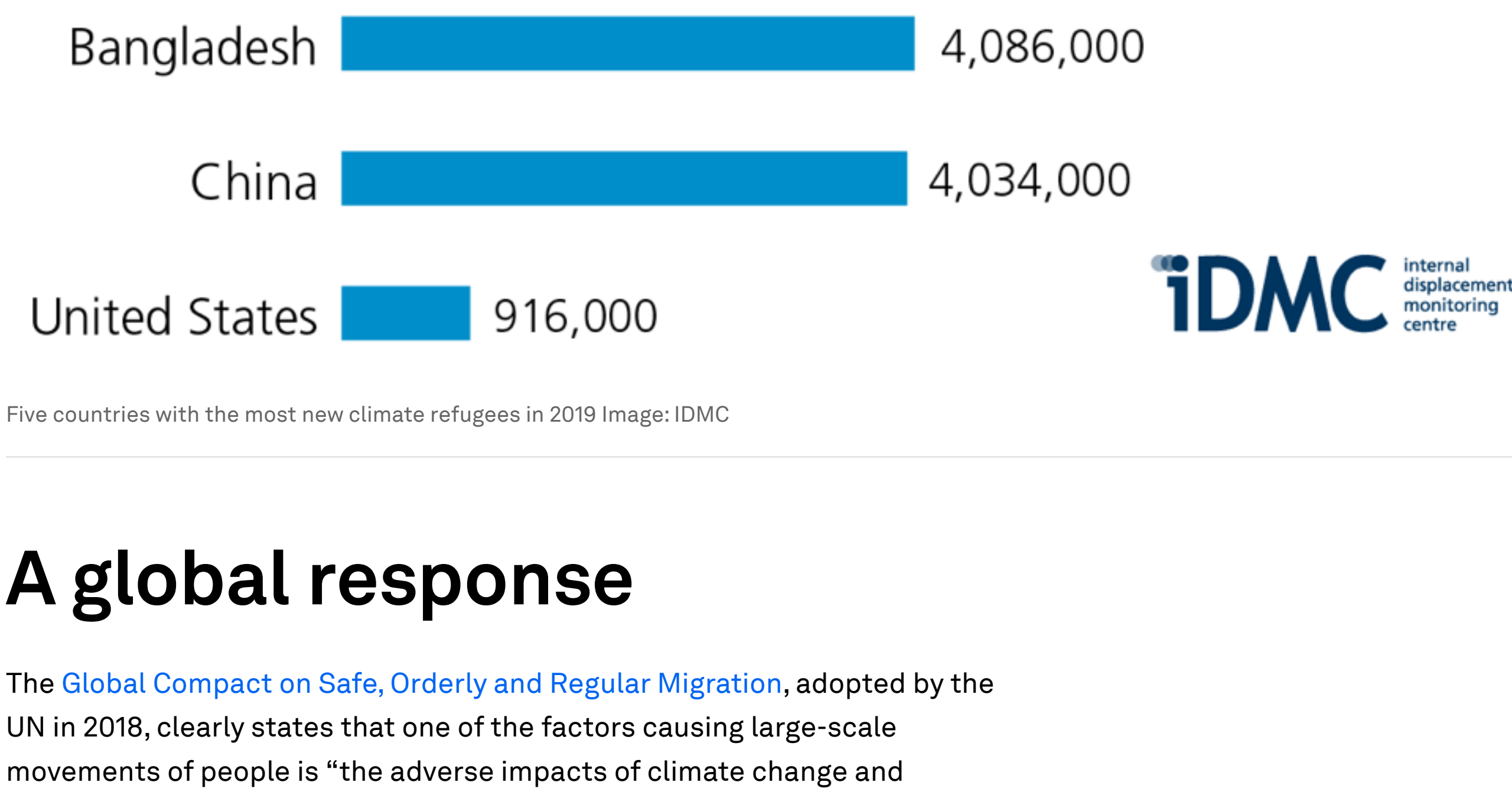
The term "climate refugees" was first coined to describe the increasing [large-scale migration](#) and cross-border mass movements of people that were partly caused by such weather-related disasters.

In April, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released [data](#) showing that the number of people displaced by climate change-related disasters since 2010 has risen to 21.5 million, pointing out that "in addition to sudden disasters, climate change is a complex cause of food and water shortages, as well as difficulties in accessing natural resources."

Sea-level rise is another threat. Over the past 30 years, the number of people living in coastal areas at high risk of rising sea levels has increased from 160 million to 260 million, 90% of whom are from poor developing countries and small island states. For example, in Bangladesh it is predicted that 17% of the country will be submerged by the rise in sea level by 2050, and 20 million people living there will lose their homes.

The Ecosystem Threat Register (ETR) released in September 2018 by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), an Australian international think tank, points out that at least [1.2 billion people](#) could be displaced by these threats by 2050. In this context, the international response to the problem has gradually begun to progress.

Five countries with the most new displacements by disasters in 2019



Five countries with the most new climate refugees in 2019. Image: IDMC



A global response

The [Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#), adopted by the UN in 2018, clearly states that one of the factors causing large-scale movements of people is "the adverse impacts of climate change and environmental degradation," which includes natural disasters, desertification, land degradation, drought and rising sea levels. For migrants who are forced to leave their countries of origin due to environmental degradation, the compact clearly states that governments should work to protect climate refugees in the countries of their arrival by devising planned relocation and visa options if adaptation and return is not possible in their countries of origin.

Earlier, in March 2018, the UN Human Rights Council [adopted](#) an outcome document that discussed the issue of cross-border movement of people brought about by climate crises from the perspective of human rights protection.

The document pointed out that there are many people who do not fit the definition of "refugees" among those who are forced to migrate long distances and cross borders due to climate impacts, and that the legal system to protect their human rights is inadequate, as the "non-refoulement principle", which states that people who have crossed borders should not be deported or repatriated to their original countries against their will, is not applied. It then urged governments to "incorporate the concept of human rights protection into the planning and implementation of climate change measures," including preventing large-scale displacement by allowing people to live in conditions that protect their human rights, and promoting human rights-conscious planned relocation as a means of adapting to climate change.

The decision made by the UN Commission on Human Rights in January 2018 also attracted a great deal of attention from those concerned.

Ioane Teitiota from Kiribati, an island nation in the South Pacific that is in danger of losing its land due to rising sea levels, applied for refugee status as a "climate refugee" with the New Zealand government, but his application was rejected and he was repatriated to Kiribati in 2015. In 2016, he filed a complaint with the UN Covenant on Civil Liberties, claiming that his right to life had been violated by the repatriation.

Although the Committee [upheld](#) the New Zealand government's decision, stating that Mr Teitiota was not facing an imminent threat to his life, it acknowledged that "the effects of climate change", such as rising sea levels, "pose a serious threat to the right to life of people living in countries like Kiribati." It concluded that national courts and others must take this into account when challenging the repatriation of migrants to their countries of origin. The decision held that people facing climate change impacts that violate their right to life cannot be repatriated to their country of origin. The decision has been [hailed](#) as "a decision that opens the door to climate change-related refugee claims."

Government action

Governments are also becoming more aware of the issue. In 2015, just prior to the adoption of the Paris Agreement, the then-president of the European Union, Jean-Claude Juncker, [stated](#) in his policy speech: "Climate change is even one [of] the root causes of a new migration phenomenon. Climate refugees will become a new challenge – if we do not act swiftly," he said, pointing out the importance of strengthening efforts. Discussions have also begun in the European Parliament.

In February, shortly after taking office, US President Joe Biden issued an [executive order](#) asking Jake Sullivan, assistant to the president for national security, to discuss with the relevant federal departments and agencies about formulating a position on how to identify climate refugees who have been displaced by climate change and what kind of protection and support the US government can provide to them. The report is expected to be submitted to the president in August.

However, it is hard to say that the international community and governments are doing enough to deal with climate change refugees, given the seriousness of the problem.

One of the reasons for this is the lack of a clear climate refugees definition, and the absence of international organizations and institutions to address and clarify the issue. Climate change refugees are not covered by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which protects people who have a well-founded fear of persecution on racial, religious or other grounds, nor are they eligible for protection under the Convention. Official data on climate refugees is virtually non-existent – this is why they are called the "forgotten victims of climate change."

As the problem of climate change refugees worsens, there is an urgent need to clarify the definition of climate refugees, including comprehensive data on internally displaced persons (IDPs), and create an [international mechanism](#) to protect them. It may be desirable to further discuss how to tackle this issue under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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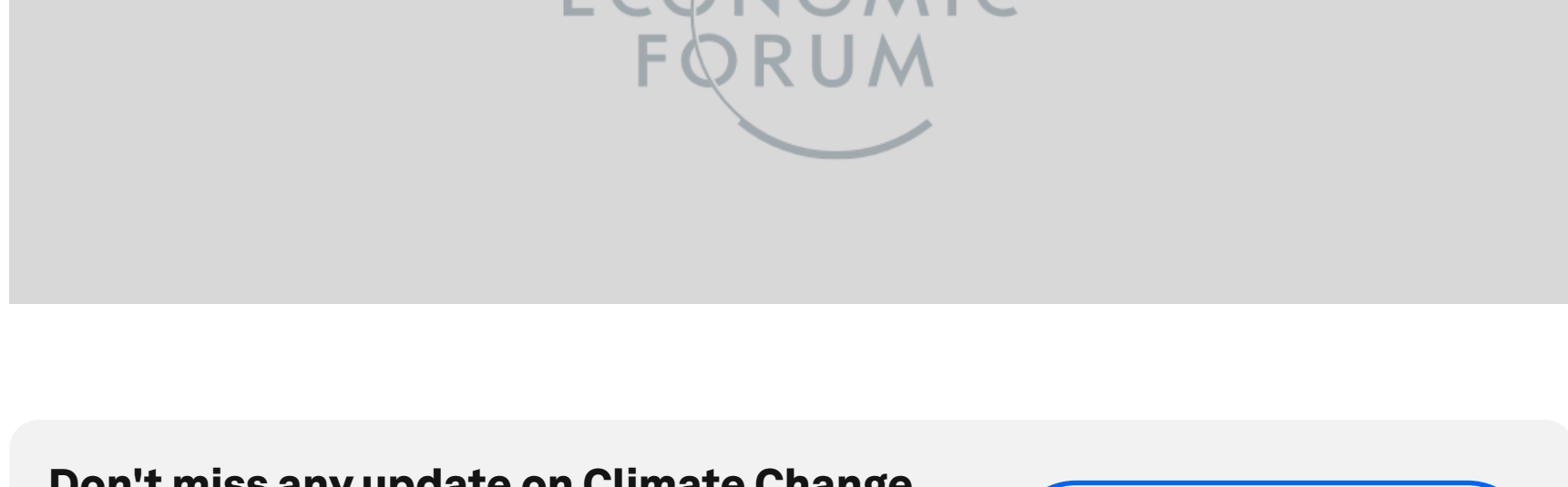
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Japan's efforts fall short

Compared to many developed countries, Japan has not shown enough interest in the issue of climate refugees or awareness of the related idea of climate security. Moreover, Japan's refugee protection measures have long been pointed out to be inadequate. In terms of the number of people accepted, only 44 people were recognized as refugees in Japan in 2019. This is a far cry from Germany, which accepted 54,000 people in the same year.

As an Asian developed country where many people affected by the climate crisis live, it is urgent for Japan to seriously address the issue of climate refugees. Otherwise, Japan will face a major security risk posed by climate refugees and reputational risk in the not-too-distant future.



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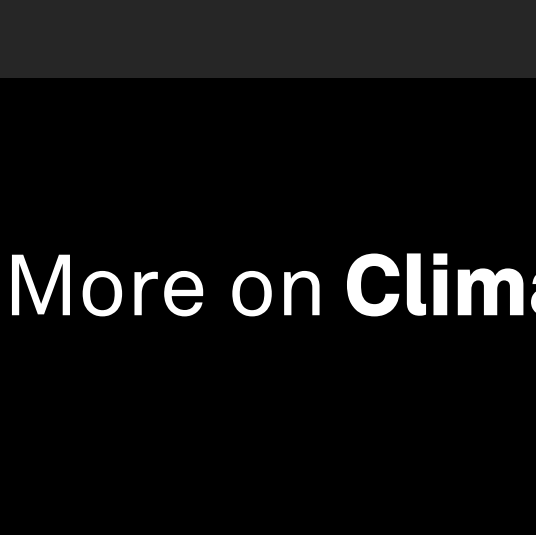
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