

Climate Change and Environmental Refugees: The Case of Bangladesh

Obayedul Hoque Patwary

Module E

At the beginning of the twenty first century, Climate change has become one of the greatest challenges to international peace and security. It is seriously affecting hundreds of millions of people today and is likely to aggravate the scenario in the days ahead. Climate change presents enormous challenges to the humanity of which environmental refugees appear to be one of the biggest concerns of the day. Indeed, the consequences of climate change on the mobility of people present humanity with unprecedented challenges. Reportedly, in 2008, 20 million persons have been displaced by extreme weather events, compared to 4.6 million internally displaced by conflict and violence over the same period. Even, in 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 1990:20) warned that “the greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration” – with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and severe drought. Besides, in 1992 IOM together with the Refugee Policy Group published a report on “Migration and Environment” in which it is stated that “Large numbers of people are moving as a result of environmental degradation that has increased dramatically in recent years. The number of such migrants could rise substantially as larger areas of the earth become uninhabitable as a result of climate change.”(IOM, 1992). A changing climate is likely to affect all parts of the world adversely directly or indirectly. However, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) recognizes that Small Island Developing States (SIDS), low-lying and coastal countries, Africa, and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (UNFCCC 2007). In this context, Bangladesh is considered as one of the most vulnerable countries in the face of climate change. The Global Climate Risk Index 2010 (CRI), which was developed by a German-based organization “Germanwatch”, recognized Bangladesh as the most vulnerable country to the extreme weather events and most affected in the period of 1990-2008 (Harmeling 2009). Furthermore, it is predicted that 20-30 million people will be displaced due to the predicted sea level rise and other consequences of global warming which can potentially destabilise the society and the state as a whole. Nowadays in the vulnerable coastal areas and flood prone areas of Bangladesh, many wake up to find themselves on the receiving end of climatic change impacts and disasters and without shelter or livelihoods. The existing and the potential environmental refugees challenge the security and stability of the state in a number of ways. So, it is imperative to understand the magnitude of the problem and the danger that it presents to the people of Bangladesh.

