

Climate Change and Refugees



*Based on an article by Gary Antonides
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We have heard about the effects of climate change – more storms, more droughts, rising seas, hotter temperatures, adverse effects on wildlife, etc. But there is one effect that has not been publicized much that will become a major concern in the not-too-distant future. There will be major areas throughout the world that will become inhospitable to humans. The result will be millions of refugees, and for many countries, including the U.S., many immigrants. We need to plan how we will react to this before we are overwhelmed by it.

Climate has recently become a more immediate issue because on March 20 the IPCC ([Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#)) of the UN issued a [report](#) that found the world is likely to miss its target of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees C (2.7 degrees F) above preindustrial temperatures. If we go much beyond that, climate disasters would become so extreme that many people could not adapt. Heat waves, famines and infectious diseases will claim millions of lives. Life on Earth will be fundamentally, irrevocably altered.

Climate Change has and will continue to create a multitude of critical issues that the international community must confront, according to the new IPCC report, including:

- Large-scale human migration, particularly from developing countries, due to resource scarcity, more extreme weather, and other factors
- Intensifying competition for food, water, and other resources, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa
- Increased frequency and severity of disease outbreaks
- In the US, increased border stress due to the severe effects of climate change in parts of Central America

Although climate change is usually not the sole factor in migration, it is a contributing factor in migration and in conflicts. Even in the U.S., it is thought that “Millions and likely tens of millions of Americans” will move because of climate through the end of the century (see [link](#)).

The IPCC’s report shows that humanity has already fundamentally and irreversibly transformed the Earth. We have increased global average temperatures by at least 1.1 degrees Celsius (2 degrees F) since the start of the industrial era. The risks from this relatively low level of warming are turning out to be greater than scientists anticipated, not because they were wrong, but because our infrastructure, social networks and economic

systems have proved exceptionally vulnerable to even small amounts of warming, the report said. The researchers say it's all but inevitable that the world will surpass 1.5 degrees C of warming by the early 2030s. A child born today would see several feet of sea level rise, the extinction of hundreds of species, and the migration of millions of people from places where they can no longer survive.

Our federal and state governments have established agencies to deal with the inevitable influx of refugees. [The Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylees \(MORA\)](#) is responsible for assisting refugees in adapting to new homes in Maryland. It gets funding from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services, and, in turn, rather than provide direct services to refugees, funds “program partners” to provide services such as financial, health, employment, and educational services. The partners include some colleges, some non-profits, the Maryland Dept. of Health, and others.

While the organizations’ stated missions seem to cover all the important considerations for refugees, they are still in a learning mode and haven’t been tested with anywhere near the number of new refugees we expect in the near future, particularly in regard to coordination with counties and cities.

A recent example of how refugees were handled is described at this [link](#). When thousands of Afghans left their homes as the Taliban took control, several dozen resettled in the Baltimore Region. Anne Arundel County got involved when it became aware of the needs of its new neighbors. The County’s Office of Emergency Management oversees and assists with a long list of support for more than 75 men, women, and children now in the region. Tasks include help with learning English, accessing medical care, enrolling children in local schools, finding permanent housing, and providing legal resources. “We feel like we’ve been helpful, and we feel like we’ve learned a lot so that we’re potentially ready for future refugees...” said County Executive Stuart Pittman.”

We must continue to do our part locally to reduce greenhouse gases, protect our environment, slow climate change and mitigate sea level rise. At the same time we should be prepared to support the humanitarian crisis and make our infrastructure more resilient.

About the Alliance

The Anne Arundel Alliance for Livable Communities is a non-partisan coalition of 25 local and state organizations advocating for sustainable growth and environmental protections to safeguard and enhance residents’ quality of life.

Anne Arundel Alliance for Livable Communities

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