

How climate change destroys human rights

Environmental destruction caused by people is poised to become the "most massive human rights violation ever".

In a 2012 interview, Oregon State University philosophy professor emerita Kathleen Dean Moore said, "Climate change is damaging food supplies, spreading disease and creating refugees, and it is poised to become the most massive human rights violation the world has ever seen."

Increasingly, the two issues - climate change and human rights - are being recognized as inextricably connected. Two major studies published this year reinforce that link, providing sobering evidence that a hotter, increasingly unstable climate is fueling more conflict and human rights violations, and that it is happening sooner rather than later.

The first **study** was published in the journal *Science* by researchers at Princeton University and the University of California, Berkeley. Researchers found that a hotter, more unstable climate exacerbates three specific types of violence: personal violence (such as murder, rape and domestic violence), intergroup violence/political instability and institutional breakdowns (including the collapse of governing institutions and whole civilizations).

Lead author Prof. Solomon Hsiang said the study includes "meta-analysis" of 60 previous studies from disciplines like history, economics, geography, criminology and political science. The research strongly indicates that tropical regions of the world, in particular, will be "very intensely hit".

If tropical populations remain on their current trajectories, Hsiang said certain types of intergroup violence could exceed a 50 percent amplification in association with climate change.

Hsiang is cautious about drawing a direct link between climate change data and specific human rights abuses, but said, "There's certainly the potential for situations where the climate leads to political changes that could adversely affect people's rights," adding, [climate change] destabilises and tests the amount of stress social institutions can endure."

"There is a lot of political rhetoric after disasters where people talk about becoming stronger as a community or economically because of it, but...there is very little evidence that is actually true," Hsiang said. "Populations tend to be permanently worse off, families don't necessarily become stronger because of these disasters, they end up struggling much more. Political organisations tend to do very badly."

In the face of greater violence, Hsiang said research continues to examine how certain social and political institutions may help mitigate some of the impacts that lead to more conflict. "What are the things that let societies weather [climate change] without exhibiting any type of conflict? That's what we want to know so we can help create 'pockets of calm' in the future," Hsiang said.

Sooner than later

The second [study](#), published in the journal Nature by the University of Hawaii's (UH) Department of Geography, presents a concrete time frame when temperatures will reach unprecedented levels - so-called "climate departure".

The projected timing of climate departure refers to specific dates when given locations around the world continuously exceed historical temperature averages for the last 150 years. The study does not suggest the world will lose seasonality but, when averaged over a year's time, temperatures will depart from recent historical norms.

Co-author Ryan Longman said, "The coldest year in the future will be hotter than the hottest year in the past." He added that the earliest impacts will occur in the tropics and have a ripple-effect to northern latitudes.

Speaking from Honolulu, UH researcher and co-author Abby Frazier said climate change provokes three main reactions in plants and animals: migrating to more suitable environments, staying and adapting to the new climate or going extinct.

"It's very sobering," Frazier said. "We see all of the evidence piling up and it's really hard for people to accept that our future is heading toward these unprecedented climates. We're trying our best to get the information out there in a concrete way that can connect people to this and is not abstract."

"The coldest year in the future will be hotter than that hottest year in the past."

- Ryan Longman

The UH study finds that on average, by 2047, under a "business-as-usual" scenario, the world will be experiencing a "radically different climate." The study pays special attention to tropical regions. Frazier points out that while the largest absolute changes in climate do not occur in the tropics, because they are, by nature, climatically stable, it takes less change to exceed historic norms. As a result, the tropics are expected to experience climate departure first with Indonesia, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt, Mexico, India, Colombia and Iraq forecast to see climate departure as soon as 2020 and no later than 2036.

"There's no doubt that those early changes in the tropics will be felt at higher latitude even if the temperature is not getting hotter as fast," Longman said.

Frazier noted that climate change puts additional stresses on countries already facing extreme

environmental degradation, burgeoning young populations and growing political instability. These countries have lower GDPs and less economic capacity to respond to climate change than those that have had the biggest role in producing carbon emissions.

From toxic to 'more toxic'

Richard Pearshouse, a senior researcher with the health and human rights division of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in Geneva, recently contributed to a [report](#) examining environmental, health and safety conditions in and around the tanneries of Hazaribagh, on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Listed as one of the [top ten toxic threats](#) on the planet in 2013, Hazaribagh epitomises how an environment degraded by extreme pollution and fed by climate refugees produces a human rights catastrophe.

Pearshouse told Al Jazeera, "Climate change will affect many of the most vulnerable in society. It will affect the poor, it will affect religious or ethnic minorities, it will affect women and children. That should say a lot to a human rights organisation. It's going to be the most marginalised who feel those impacts most acutely."

From health, housing and education to the right to life itself, Pearshouse sees climate change as having a massive impact on "a vast range of civil and political rights".

"If [climate change] is going to be about impacting on the most marginalised, then it's going to be an issue of discrimination...and whether or not existing resilience or mitigation measures that are put in place by governments or international mechanisms truly reflect the reality of who's suffering most on the ground."

Human rights groups like HRW, Amnesty International and others already work with environmental and climate groups but Pearshouse sees room for greater cooperation on a national and provincial level. "I think that as the human cost of climate change becomes increasingly evident, it's untenable for human rights organisations not to be working on some of those issues," he said.

[Bangladesh](#) is a prime example of how climate change impacts impoverished fishing villages along the Bay of Bengal with more frequent, more powerful cyclones and flooding which drives villagers to migrate to places like Hazaribagh. There, out of desperation, the rural poor live in slums where the air, water and earth are so polluted by chemicals, tin roofing corrodes in months rather than years and severe health afflictions are the norm.

"As someone who works on human rights and health, to me and my colleagues, that [climate change] overlap is very much apparent, particularly when you go someplace like Hazaribagh and see the amount of human suffering caused by extreme environmental degradation. To me that overlap is very, very obvious," Pearshouse said.

Whether it's a government unwilling to enforce basic health and environmental protective safeguards in Bangladesh, state-sponsored repression of climate and environmental defenders in Russia, or

military forces involved in illegal logging in Cambodia, Pearshouse said examples of clear links between the unofficial exercise of government power and environmental harm are found around the world.

Facing a human rights ‘meltdown’

Far from the toxic tanneries of Bangladesh, indigenous peoples across Russia’s far north face new and increasing threats to their basic human rights as resource extraction, development, industrial pollution and climate change converge at the top of the world.

Rodion Sulyandziga represents the interests of **RAIPON** (Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North) with the Arctic Council, an intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation among Arctic states and indigenous communities.

Speaking from Moscow, Sulyandziga described how the loss of sea ice, decline in snow levels and permafrost and general warming all impact the most basic human rights of the 41 indigenous groups in Siberia and the Russian far north and Far East: the right to live.

Increasingly unpredictable weather and unreliable sea ice directly impacts animal migration, which affects subsistence hunting for traditional food sources like reindeer and sea mammals. Warmer temperatures, Sulyandziga said, also hasten the introduction of plant and animal diseases as southern species of fish and birds move north.

In addition to a warming Arctic, Russia’s indigenous peoples also face the rush to exploit vast energy and mineral resources. Oil, gas, coal, nickel, iron ore, platinum and other minerals draw multi-national corporations to Russia’s most remote regions where highly restricted access makes monitoring health and safety practices, damage and pollution mitigation and other conditions difficult or impossible.

RAIPON has worked with Greenpeace and smaller environmental organisations to protect the environment critical to the livelihoods of indigenous peoples, Sulyandziga said.

Last year RAIPON was subject to a temporary closure when the Russian Ministry of Justice forced it to cease activities during a five-month investigation of what it alleged were “illegal activities” and defenders called a registration technicality. This kind of extra scrutiny of NGOs makes protecting indigenous and environmental interests even more difficult.

Sulyandziga added, “Russia now approved the Arctic strategy meaning they declare the Arctic is a main resource [of] economic development for the whole country. That means potential conflicts will grow among stakeholders, including indigenous people.”

He also spoke of the threat to basic human rights for indigenous groups stemming from illegal timber harvesting, the destruction of arboreal forests and its role in massive wildfires and last year’s devastating floods in the Russian Far East. His own people, the Udege (which means “forest people”)

live in the affected area near the Amur River north of Vladivostok.

The biggest human rights violation ever

Back at the University of Hawaii, lead author of the above [climate departure study](#), [Dr. Camilo Mora](#), assistant professor in the UH geography department, sees climate change as a problem of fairness. "While developed countries are benefitting from [carbon] emissions, developing countries are the ones that are going to pay the most consequences from this," Mora told Al Jazeera.

"The science is as solid as it can be. Now it's for us to start acting and I think that's where we're struggling to convince people of how real this thing is. We have seven billion people we need to convey this message to."

Mora said climate change is, and will continue to be, interconnected to the most basic of human rights: the right to have a home, food and water. "I don't think there is a disconnection [to human rights], in fact, things are more connected than people tend to assume."

Greenpeace International's executive director, Dr. Kumi Naidoo, argues the same point. Naidoo recently said, "The struggle to avert catastrophic climate change and the struggles for human rights, poverty and gender equity are and should be seen as two sides of the same coin."

Read an extended interview about human rights and climate change with Greenpeace International's executive director Kumi Naidoo [here](#).

[Jon Letman](#) is an independent journalist in Hawaii, covering wildlife conservation and politics in the Pacific Rim.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/humanrights/2013/12/how-climate-change-destroys-human-rights-20131217174532837148.html>