

Why Climate Change is a Human Rights Violation

By [Janani Balasubramanian](#) Fusion February 27, 2015 <http://fusion.net/story/53741/why-climate-change-is-a-human-rights-violation/>

The rise in sea levels isn't a coincidence or an act of God – it's a man-made weapon.

It's not just about the temperature heating up a few degrees or the polar bears finding new homes – though if you go by media coverage, polar bears are a bigger story than the mass death and displacement of people — largely poor, mostly brown — across the world.

For example: Malawi's agricultural economy is being gutted right now by [one of the worst floods in 50 years](#), with nearly 200,000 people displaced and homeless. Where is Al Gore? The dozens of celebrities who put on Earth Day concerts? Sometimes it seems like the big names in environmental “activism” are more interested in jumping on a trending issue, not centering the lives of those most impacted by climate violence. And let's be clear, climate change is violence—it is a force of death, impoverishment, and displacement.

South Asian coastal farmers and fisherfolk are expected to see [larger and larger yield losses](#) in the next few decades, due to a combination of melting glaciers, uneven precipitation, and rising oceans. Sea level rise is a type of ‘natural’ weaponry generated through the domination of water and air by specific world powers.

Climate change is the disastrous fallout of the profit-making actions of largely Western-controlled governments and multinational corporations. This fallout is most severely impacting the peoples who had very little direct hand in those actions, or shares of the

profits that have come from them. That profit is generated by excessive fossil fuel use and carbon emissions that then produce the climatic consequences that most severely impact poor people. Poor people tend to live in areas with the least protection and direct services, and participate in industries like fishing and farming that are highly climate-vulnerable. Negligence on the part of those governments and corporations towards peoples who have been displaced or further impoverished by climate change is a form of violence. That negligence has included [severe underfunding](#) for climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, and relative inaction or slow action on curbing overconsumption.

In 2014, the government of New Zealand Court of Appeal made headlines after it [refused a climate refugee appeal](#) made by Ioane Teitiota, a 37 year old man from the South Pacific island of Kiribati. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Kiribati – a nation of over 100,000 people living in about 1.3 million square miles – [will be completely underwater by the end of the century](#) and the government is beginning to buy land on the neighboring island of Fiji to prepare.

The New Zealand court cited that Teitiota's case was a novel appeal but that millions were in the same situation, and that if they were to accept his claim "people who are facing medium-term economic deprivation, or the immediate consequences of natural disasters or warfare ... would be entitled to protection under the Refugee Convention." New Zealand actually *refused* the claim because it says the displacement Teitiota faces is *akin* to disasters and war, failing to acknowledge it is directly caused by the environmental harm generated by New Zealand and other first world nations.

A 2012 UN report estimated there may be [200 million displaced by climate change by 2050](#). Whatever the number, most of these people, like Teitiota, are not covered by migrant and refugee claims which would provide needed relief and relocation. This is partly because granting such claims would validate the notion that climate change is a gross human rights violation, since most refugee claims are made on the basis of war and/or persecution.

The framing here is key: understanding the rise in sea levels as solely an environmental phenomenon prompts us to try to save polar bears and ocean water. Understanding sea

level rise as a weapon makes us wonder ‘who’s pulling the trigger?’ and ‘who designed the gun?’

To answer those questions, follow the clues to a string of fossil fuel contracts and government inertia. Two-thirds of all carbon emissions [are generated by only 90 corporations](#), including several government-run enterprises like enterprises like Saudi Aramco and Norway’s Statoil. The US Department of Defense is, on its own, [the world’s 34th largest emitter](#). This direct collusion, coupled with [massive fossil fuel lobbies and kickbacks](#), makes most wealthier governments useless in terms of seeking environmental responsibility, let alone ownership for massive climate-related life loss. *They* designed the gun, as well as some billion-dollar marketing and [faux-information campaigns](#) to act as its silencer.

Shifting the frame to ‘climate change as violence’ helps us make sense of how Malawi could go through one of the world’s worst floods, and Kiribati go practically underwater, and many of us don’t hear a whisper about it. It clarifies why all this could happen while international bodies like the United Nations and European Union drag their heels on creating quotas or limits on emissions, or on offering literal homes and resources to displaced communities.

Alteration in atmospheric-oceanic circulations (such as El Niño) also generates sea level unpredictability and high surges for islands and coasts in particular. These regional variations, coupled with the higher percentage of global south economies relying on agriculture, fishing, and other land/water-related industries makes the world’s poorest regions the most vulnerable. From 1970-2012, storm and flood events in the least developed countries accounted for about [70% of climate disaster-related deaths](#) the world over.

Part of this warfare’s mechanism is ignorance around just how much the regional impacts of climate change vary greatly from global averages. This is particularly true with regards to rising sea levels. (It is also difficult to get an accurate picture due to [historical clustering of sea level monitoring sites](#) in the global north.)

These failures, calculated or not, become a long-term, escalating, and unpredictable warfare on survival economies, especially in the global south—warfare where the enemies, weapons, and victims each remain somewhat hazy.

Whether or not the exact numbers on sea level rise are certain, the loss of life and livelihood is.

The summary is this: Emissions might work on a global average, but livelihoods don't.

Viewing climate change as globalized violence, and sea level rise as one of its forms, also changes our approach to holding nations and corporations responsible. Citizens of the world have to press charges for human rights violations or even war crimes, not just environmental degradation—for both current and past harms. We have to look at figures of how many inches the ocean will rise and how many more storm events will wipe out coastal economies, and directly relate human lives to those numbers. We need to prioritize the people whose homes and livings are going literally underwater, and make the heavy emitters (corporations and rich nations) pay.

We know our planet is in peril. But it's time to start talking about the people dying because of our failure to get real about climate change.