



Human Rights Now

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Statement: States Must Make Larger Commitments to Mitigate and Address the Predicted Harms of Climate Change

The current Climate Change Conference in Madrid (COP 25) and the recent UN Climate Action Summit in September have once again reiterated the critical warnings that climate scientists and activists have been making for years now that the global environment is facing drastic and irreversible changes which will have significantly negative impacts on millions of people's human rights. Such warnings have gone unheeded by states which continue to emit high levels of greenhouse gasses (GHGs). Human Rights Now (HRN), a Tokyo based human rights NGO, observes with regret and concern that despite a lot of recent talk of action, there has been a lack of serious commitments by states to reduce their contributions to climate change and do more to address its negative effects, particularly among the highest emitting states contributing the most to the problem.

The Highest Emitting States Failed to Make Serious Commitments at the UN Climate Change Summit

The three highest GHG-emitting states made no new commitments at the summit. China, the highest emitting state, did not announce any new targets beyond their past commitments in the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, and India, the third highest emitting state, only stated its intention to finalize its development plans soon, which include reducing GHG emissions, and to raise its use of renewable energy sources without giving a timeframe. The United States, the second highest emitter which announced its withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord altogether in 2017, did not even make a statement at the summit. US President Trump, who has called climate change a "hoax", paid a short visit to the summit and left within around 15 minutes, and his administration has actively taken measures to roll back limits on GHG emissions and other environmental protections.¹ Japan, the seventh highest emitter, also did not announce any new commitments and only repeated its existing commitment to cut GHG emissions by 26% by 2030, itself a quite weak commitment in light of the urgency of the crisis.

In stark contrast, some of the greatest commitments and sacrifices in combatting climate change at the summit were made by the least developed states, all of which pledged to enhance their climate plans next year and reach net zero emissions by 2050. This includes small island developing states, which will face the worst harms from climate change the soonest while contributing less than 1% to GHG emissions. Altogether the summit saw 65 countries pledging efforts to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 and to enhance their climate change plans (Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs) by the end of next year, the majority of them developing states. With such strong commitments made by developing states, the highest emitting states that contribute the most to the problem have no excuse to do less and compelling reasons to do much more.

Without more serious commitments to take substantial cuts in GHG emissions, especially among the highest emitting states, even the new pledges that were made will not be enough to avoid serious harms to human rights. Meanwhile, conditions are worsening across the globe at an accelerating pace. A report by the summit's

¹ Somini Sengupta and Lisa Friedman, "At U.N. Climate Summit, Few Commitments and U.S. Silence", The New York Times, 23 Sept. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/23/climate/climate-summit-global-warming.html>.

Science Advisory Group noted that the average global temperature for 2015-2019 is on track to be the hottest five-year period on record, average global temperatures have already risen an estimated 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels, and GHG concentrations in the atmosphere continue to accelerate, with 2019 witnessing a 2% increase in fossil fuel GHG emissions over 2018.² These facts highlight the extreme urgency for state action to significantly cut emissions and to prepare for the predicted harms of climate change.

Climate Change Will Cause Devastating Harms Including to the Full Range of Human Rights

The serious urgency of the climate crisis cannot be overstated. Last year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a special report on the impacts of global warming emphasizing that serious harms will occur at 1.5°C average warming, already likely to occur between 2030 and 2052 at current rates of emission, but also that they become much worse from 2°C.³ A rise over 2°C (the upper limit adopted in the 2015 Paris Agreement) will lead to significant and irreparable harms such as widespread agricultural losses in many countries and innumerable water crises.⁴ However, a 4°C rise (which is in the range of the “business as usual” scenario of continuing GHG emissions at their current rates)⁵ is expected to cause truly catastrophic devastation including extreme heat waves (more than 6°C above average) all summer months in many countries; sea level rise from 0.5 to 1 meter inundating major cities around the world; severe impacts on human health; major and permanent losses of water sources, global biodiversity, and some areas’ agricultural capacity; and life on many small islands becoming unsustainable, among other devastating environmental shocks.⁶

According to a 2008 report by the High Commissioner for Human Rights on climate change and human rights, “global warming will potentially have implications for the full range of human rights”, including the rights to life, adequate food, water, health, housing, self-determination, and civil and political rights.⁷ In addition to the vast environmental damage which will directly harm humans, including more damaging storms and flooding, lost fresh water sources, sea inundation, lost biodiversity, desertification, the spread of tropical diseases, and many other harms, severe social and economic harms will also be caused by economic depression, mass displacement, and the destruction of peoples’ habitats and culture. The greatest harms will also be suffered by the most vulnerable populations, including the poor, women, minorities, disabled, indigenous peoples, and others, and the poorest regions, such as arid and arctic areas and small island states where adaptive capacity is already at its lowest and which have contributed the least to the problem. Severe harms such as these are already predicted to occur at current levels of warming for which states must prepare. However, severe harms to rights are predicted to occur as average temperatures approach and exceed 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, rising to significantly harmful levels from 2°C.

The latest report on climate change and human rights by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, emphasized the critical threats to the poorest segments of the population:

² UN, United in Science, 2019, <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/30023/climsci.pdf>.

³ IPCC, “Global Warming of 1.5°C”, July 2018, https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2018/07/SR15_SPM_version_stand_alone_LR.pdf.

⁴ IPCC, “Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerabilities”, https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/03/ar5_wgII_spm_en-1.pdf.

⁵ “Scenarios without additional efforts to constrain emissions (‘baseline scenarios’) lead to pathways ranging between RCP 6.0 and RCP 8.5.” The global mean surface temperature change (°C) for these pathways are for RCP 6.0: 1.4° to 3.1° and for RCP 8.5: 2.6° to 4.8° (in the period 2081-2100). IPCC, “Future Climate Changes, Risks and Impacts”, https://ar5-syr.ipcc.ch/topic_futurechanges.php.

⁶ World Bank Group, “Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4°C Warmer World Must be Avoided”, Report: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/11860>; Press release summary: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2012/11/18/new-report-examines-risks-of-degree-hotter-world-by-end-of-century>.

⁷ “Report of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the relationship between climate change and human rights”, A/HRC/10/61 (15 Jan. 2009), para. 20.

Developing countries will bear an estimated 75-80 percent of the costs of climate change. People in poverty tend to live in areas more susceptible to climate change and in housing that is less resistant; lose relatively more when affected; have fewer resources to mitigate the effects; and get less support from social safety nets or the financial system to prevent or recover from the impact. Their livelihoods and assets are more exposed, and they are more vulnerable to natural disasters that bring disease, crop failure, spikes in food prices, and death or disability. Climate change threatens to undo the last fifty years of progress in development, global health, and poverty reduction.... The World Bank estimates that without immediate action, climate change could push 120 million more people into poverty by 2030—likely an underestimate, and rising in subsequent years. Eight hundred million in South Asia alone live in climate hotspots and will see their living conditions decline sharply by 2050.⁸

His report highlighted the necessity of states acknowledging: the need for transformational social change to address these threats with human rights imperatives at the center; the threats also against civil and political rights as social conditions worsen for populations; the need for transformational policies to guarantee economic and social rights and people's essential needs under the unprecedented stresses and crises to come; the need for states to fully commit to assertive regulatory responses given the demonstrated incapacity of corporate actors to address the issue, and the need for new human rights approaches that more forcefully assert the great urgency of the crisis, clarify states' obligations, and push for concrete measures.⁹

States Must Make Stronger Commitments to Mitigate and Address the Harms of Climate Change

Human Rights Now urges the international community and all states, particularly developed and high-GHG-emitting states, to recognize the direness of the situation posed by climate change and take immediate action to mitigate and address the predicted harms. Particularly they must take action to protect the most vulnerable populations who will suffer a disproportionate share of the harms. The commitments made at the 2019 Climate Action Summit, as well as the 1.5°C target itself, must be regarded as the bare minimum to be realized. More ambitious commitments and targets are necessary in order to avoid the worst harms against the most vulnerable populations, including significant GHG emission cuts and investments in alternative energy sources to ensure that GHG levels remain well below the target of 1.5°C warming above pre-industrial levels. The Secretary-General of the UN has especially called on states to end their subsidies for fossil fuels and by 2020 stop construction of coal-fired power plants, a particularly extravagant source of GHGs.¹⁰ Japan should also show global leadership on climate change by ending its construction of coal plants in Japan and abroad, closing down existing coal plants, and switching to renewable energy sources.¹¹ In line with the recent report by Special Rapporteur Alston and many other reports by human rights mandates and bodies, states must also take a human-rights centered approach in all of their policies related to climate change, including planning and measures to protect vulnerable populations from forced displacement and the harms of climate change, and to require social impact assessments for climate change related measures, such as green energy projects like hydroelectric dams or large construction projects which themselves may pose human rights risks to populations.

Above all, developed states must commit significantly more financial and technical resources to address climate change needs particularly among developing states—including through sustainable projects, new technologies, and the Green Climate Fund—in order to achieve and exceed the \$100 billion USD per year minimum target for mitigation and adaptation set by the Paris Agreement.

⁸ "Climate change and poverty Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights", A/HRC/41/39, 25 Jun. 2019, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/A_HRC_41_39.pdf (internal citations removed).

⁹ *Id.*, pp. 17-19.

¹⁰ UN News "Is the world ready to end the coal era and embrace clean energy?", 29 Nov. 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1052271>.

¹¹ NHK World, "Japan urged to abolish coal-fired power generation", 6 Dec. 2019, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20191206_05/.