House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Climate Change and Human Rights

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Statement of Robert Blecher
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Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, Members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to speak about climate change and conflict. It's an honour to be here today of all days. Just hours ago, the UN General Assembly for the first time recognised the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, by a remarkable 161-0 margin.

I direct the Future of Conflict Program at the International Crisis Group, which was established in 1995 as an independent organisation with a mission to save lives by preventing, mitigating and resolving deadly conflict. We do so via a three-part process: 1) on-the-ground research with all sides in dispute; 2) impartial analysis of conflict drivers to identify pragmatic policy options for addressing those drivers; and 3) advocacy with conflict actors and those who influence them to shape their understanding and alter their behaviour in accordance with our recommendations.[1]

Crisis Group started its climate and conflict project because it became obvious to us that we could not fully understand conflict today, much less what it will look like in the future, without understanding the role of climate.[2] Our analysts, in certain parts of the world, increasingly identify climatic distress as a factor in the conflicts that they cover. Most scholars who study the topic agree: climate change can worsen conflict.[3] At the very least, it tends to exacerbate conflict risks that already exist, making some tense and fragile situations even tenser and more fragile. Sometimes climate can light the match, transforming a tense and fragile situation into a violent one.

But there is considerable debate about when, how and why climate change worsens conflict. General observations don't tell you very much about how climate will interact with people's

[1] Details of Crisis Group's mission and method can be found here.
[2] For an overview of Crisis Group's climate work, see the Crisis Group data visual, "How Climate Change Fuels Deadly Conflict".
[3] Dell et al. (2014), Mach et al. (2019)

lived reality in any given context at any given moment. Conflict risks, according to social scientists, rise 10-20 per cent for every half-degree Celsius of warming.[4] But in some places, small variations in temperature and precipitation will significantly increase deadly violence, whereas in other places, even large variations will not. This is because politics, history, economics, social relations and any number of other factors matter for peace and security. In particular the actions of authorities matter: how equitable, competent, inclusive and accountable they are affects how climate resilient or fragile a region will be.

Even though every last detail of the relationship between climate and conflict has yet to be nailed down, the fact is we already know a lot about it. Policymakers must not ignore it.

The most devastating climate security risks today and likely over the next two decades will be in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, and can be divided into three categories:

1) Cascading risks, which is to say, how climate change can undermine livelihoods and induce competition over land, water and other resources, driving conflict.
2) Risks relating to the security consequences of climate displacement
3) Risks relating to transboundary disputes, particularly water disputes

Let me give you a few examples.

First, cascading risks in Nigeria: Conflicts there between farmers and herders have claimed thousands of lives. Erratic precipitation and temperature have damaged crops and exacerbated food insecurity, inequality, displacement and criminality, which in turn have aggravated ethnic and political divides. Our analysis has shown that violent disputes are concentrated in Nigeria's grasslands, along the agricultural fringe used by both farmers and herders.[5]

Second, security consequences in South Sudan: Three consecutive years of historic flooding along the White Nile has caused widespread food and livelihood insecurity and, last year alone, displaced over half a million people. Many displaced have fled south to the Equatoria region, where heavily armed displaced herders have clashed with host communities over land rights, fuelling an existing insurgency and re-energising old grievances about the distribution of political power in the country.[6]

While much of the attention to climate migration in the Global North focuses on cross-border displacement – and particularly on the effects of migration on Europe and the U.S. – South Sudan serves as a good example of how most climate displacement is in fact internal. The vast

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[4] Burke et al. (2015).
[5] Crisis Group Africa Reports N°302, *Ending Nigeria's Herder-Farmer Crisis: The Livestock Reform Plan*, 4 May 2021; and N°262, *Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence*, 26 July 2018. Also see Crisis Group's data visual, "The Climate Factor in Nigeria's Farmer-Herder Violence", 21 April 2021. Eberle et al. (2020)
[6] On the insurgency, see Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°169, *South Sudan's Other War: Resolving the Insurgency in Equatoria*, 25 February 2021.

majority of South Sudan's refugees remain within the country's borders. Globally, the majority of internal climate displacement occurs in countries that also suffer from conflict.

Third, transboundary issues in the Horn of Africa: Stalled negotiations between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan over the filling and operating rules for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam have the potential to escalate into conflict. Already, the dispute is helping drive interstate proxy conflict in the region. In the longer term, Cairo sees the risk of reduced water flows once the dam is complete in existential terms. Ethiopia for its part asserts its right to use Nile waters to improve its economy. With scientists expecting more erratic precipitation in the years ahead, this zero-sum approach means that the risk of conflict hangs over this dispute, even if it remains remote for now.[7]

The security consequences of the climate change can be severe, even beyond the immediate human suffering. The failure to manage climatic distress can discredit central states and play to the advantage of non-state actors, such as jihadist and criminal groups. In Iraq, ISIS took advantage of the country's decimated agriculture in its recruiting drives. In Mexico, with state services failing, cartels are dispensing humanitarian aid packages in areas ravaged by natural disasters to bolster recruitment and win hearts and minds. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab reportedly has seized control of watering points. Four failed rainy seasons, with a fifth likely coming later this year, has left the population at the mercy of whomever controls the dwindling water supply – though the group itself seems concerned about its own vulnerability to drought.

When it comes to human rights, climate-related violence often exacerbates a long list of abuses and violations – from those that threaten the right to life and other civil and political rights to those that interfere with socio-economic rights such as those to adequate food, water, housing, work and clothing. The burden of these harms is not spread equally. Women, as well as children, struggle to get access to basic services and protect themselves from exploitation, sexual and otherwise. Women specifically are often targeted in real and symbolic struggles between jihadists and state authorities. More generally, the Global South suffers disproportionately from climate change, and even more disproportionately from climate-related violence.

It is as vital to know where climate change is a factor in conflict as where it is not – even if, or rather precisely because, conflict drivers are complex and climate change never acts alone. Misidentifying the causes of conflict muddies the search for solutions. Just as disregarding climate change deprives policymakers of relevant knowledge, the improper attribution of deadly violence to climate change can be used to shirk responsibility for poor governance or abusive rule. In this sense, the stakes of climate science are high, and we still have far too little of it.

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[7] See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°173, *Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute*, 24 June 2021; Crisis Group Statement, "Nile Dam Talks: A Short Window to Embrace Compromise", 17 June 2020; Crisis Group Statement, "Nile Dam Talks: Unlocking a Dangerous Stalemate"; Crisis Group Commentary, "Calming the Choppy Nile Dam Talks", 23 October 2019; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°271, *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, 20 March 2019.

There is a way forward. Recent improvements in forecasting, in combination with political analysis, offer the possibility that governments, international agencies and humanitarian aid groups might someday be able to intervene before violence erupts or escalates. Having a reasonable sense of where and when droughts will strike, crops will grow, rivers will overrun their banks and storms will hit have already enabled humanitarian groups to pre-position supplies, provide cash, and deploy technical support and machinery. The right kind of system could do something similar for conflict, showing where to focus preemptive dialogue and target resilience efforts.

Of course, given the existential challenge posed by the climate crisis, focusing on this type of mitigation measure may seem woefully insufficient. In a sense that is right: the world is already mired a climate crisis whose implications far outstrip our management ability. We desperately need policymakers to protect the planet at the necessary scale. But that does not absolve us of the duty to consider what we can do to save lives and protect human rights today. Developing our capacity for early intervention in climate-related violence offers one way to do so, even as we keep pushing for change at the highest and deepest levels.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.