



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Climate Change and Human Rights

Thursday, July 28, 2022

2:30 – 4:00 p.m.

Virtual via Zoom

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and welcome to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on climate change and human rights.

The topic we are taking up today is urgent.

We are witnessing more and more extreme weather events and climate-related disasters around the world, including here in the United States. This summer we've seen U.S. cities hit by torrential rains and flash floods, and we're enduring record high temperatures.

You may have seen the recent photos of water pouring into the New York subway.

People all over the world are confronting heat waves, droughts, water shortages, desertification, floods and rising sea levels, among other adverse effects.

These situations are happening more often. They have sudden, profound and highly disruptive impacts on people's lives and livelihoods, and governments are struggling to respond.

For several years now, international human rights bodies and non-governmental organizations have been sounding the alarm about the many ways these climate-related events affect people's human rights.

The U.N. Human Rights Council first expressed concern that climate change “poses an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world” in a [resolution](#) approved in March 2008.

The preamble to the [2015 Paris Agreement](#) explicitly calls on States Parties, [including the United States](#), to promote human rights and consider their human rights obligations when taking actions to address climate change.

What rights are we talking about?

The right to food. In the Central American Dry Corridor, an area severely affected by climate change that runs through El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, the number of food insecure people reached 6.4 million in 2021.

The rights to housing, health and livelihoods. Bushfires in Australia in 2019 and 2020 burned over 18 million hectares, destroyed thousands of homes, killed millions of animals, and exposed people to dangerous smoke. We’ve seen similar effects on a smaller scale in California and New Mexico this year.

The right to life itself. As least 220 people were killed in flash floods following heavy rainfalls in Western Europe in July 2021. The very existence of people living in small island states is threatened by rising sea levels and mega-charged hurricanes and cyclones.

The adverse effects of climate change are magnified for indigenous peoples whose territories overlap with areas that hold much of the world’s biodiversity. Indigenous peoples play an essential role in conserving and sustainably managing that biodiversity. Climate change is putting at risk not only their livelihoods but their cultural practices and even their self-determination.

This Commission has touched on these issues in many previous hearings -- most recently, while examining the root causes of migration in Central America and the drivers of conflict in Nigeria. Today we will look thematically at four contexts where experts have consistently told us that climate change is increasing vulnerability to human rights violations.

Our witnesses will discuss how the effects of climate change can exacerbate violent conflict, contribute to migration and cause forced displacement. We will hear about the risks that climate change poses for indigenous populations.

We will also hear about the increasing threats and attacks against human rights defenders who focus on environmental issues. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders has found that these defenders are particularly vulnerable.

The NGO Global Witness has [reported](#) that 1,540 land and environmental defenders were killed between 2012 and 2020. Over half of the attacks took place in three countries: Colombia, Mexico and the Philippines.

I want to emphasize that the nature and extent of climate change is such that all people everywhere face risks from its adverse effects. A recent [report](#) from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that at least 3.3 billion people are highly vulnerable to its impacts.

At the same time, I share the fear that these impacts will fall most heavily on communities and populations that are already disadvantaged, deepening existing inequalities.

I believe we must make sure that the steps we take to respond to climate change do not make inequality worse.

To achieve that, those most affected by climate change must be at the center of the conversation about how to respond. Those conversations need to be locally grounded, and the rights to participation, access to information, and access to justice must be guaranteed.

Climate change adaptation and mitigation measures must comply with states' obligations to ensure the right to an adequate standard of living. That means protecting people whose livelihoods and food security depend on the weather, like rural smallholders.

Most violent conflicts involve struggles over control of resources. Finding ways to equitably and sustainably manage resources, consistent with human rights norms such as non-discrimination, should be part of our efforts to resolve conflicts.

We must protect those who advocate for rights-based solutions to climate change. The right to be an environmental defender must be guaranteed.

I am sure our witnesses will have specific recommendations, including steps that Congress should take, and I look forward to hearing them.

I turn now to Co-Chair Smith for his opening remarks.