

**OPENING REMARKS - JPM**  
**“Environmental Refugees and Displaced Persons: Protecting  
the Vulnerable”**  
**Thursday, Nov. 17, 2011 2:00 p.m.**  
**Rayburn B-318**

Good afternoon and thank you for attending this briefing on environmental refugees and displaced persons. I want to extend a special welcome to our distinguished panelists and moderator. I would also like to thank Molly Hofsommer and the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing this briefing. I also want to acknowledge Ernie Edwards of Massachusetts for his leadership on this issue.

Forced population displacement due to weather-related disasters and environmental degradation is a growing humanitarian concern. Across the globe, populations are coping with extreme weather events, challenging environmental conditions, and loss of territory from rising sea levels. Although estimates of the number of affected individuals varies, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees conservatively estimates six million people per year, mostly in the developing world, are forcibly displaced due to these environmental challenges.

Governments often lack the resources necessary to assist these vulnerable groups. In addition, large gaps exist in current legal protection frameworks, leaving these groups vulnerable to abuse. For example, a significant number of environmentally

displaced persons do not cross an international border and therefore cannot invoke refugee protection.

Statelessness from environmental displacement is a growing concern as well. Small island and low-lying coastal states face the threat of losing their land to rising sea levels. These populations are often forced to migrate, leaving large numbers of individuals stateless. These populations need the protection of the international community. We cannot allow entire cultures to simply disappear.

As many of my colleagues know, I have been very involved in human rights issues in Central America and Colombia – my history with El Salvador, for example, covers nearly three decades. Right now, these countries are under water, literally. Winter after winter – or what they call winter, since it never gets cold – they have suffered devastating rains, flooding and massive internal displacement, each year worse than the year before. The United Nations has named El Salvador the most vulnerable country on the planet to climate-related disasters.

If there's not enough rain in the eastern Horn of Africa, there's way too much rain in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia and Brazil. Entire towns disappear. Mountains and hillsides crumble away, sending an avalanche of mud crashing down on poor villages and neighborhoods. People are killed. Children are swept away in raging waters. And basic infrastructure – roads, bridges, water systems, housing and

government facilities – are ruined or simply disappear. Monies that might have been used for social investment and food security now have to be used on figuring out how to replace a bridge that won't be torn away by next year's floods.

We don't have to look half a world away to find people and countries devastated by weather-related events and environmental degradation. It's happening in our very own hemisphere. The result is more people hungry; more people homeless; more people impoverished; more people forced to leave their home communities – and often their home countries – in search of some way for them and their families to survive.

Today, we will hear from a few of the groups working to assist these populations and fill the existing protection gaps. The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration, the Institute for the Study of International Migration, and Refugees International will each discuss their efforts to protect environmental refugees and displaced persons.

It is clear to anyone watching the news and looking around the world that we need to respond to this crisis – that there is much that needs to be done. I hope today's briefing will advance the conversation as to what can be done to help countries and communities become more resilient to changing conditions in their environment and weather in order to prevent or lessen displacement; help governments prepare for increased

displacement; and raise the profile of this pressing human rights issue.

Thank you for being here today to engage on this critical issue.