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21ST CENTURY DIASPORA? : ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES AND THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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ABSTRACT: Recent scientific research has linked increasing rates of sea level rise, prolonged drought, desertification and related phenomena to climate change. The direct impacts of climate change have become increasingly evident and consequences increasingly stark. The overwhelming consensus of the scientific community, as represented by major scientific academies and societies, is that the age for skepticism is over. Climate change is real, is an anthropogenic phenomenon, and that adaptation rather than prevention is to be the order of the day. Concurrently there are economic, legal and political forces pushing back strongly against not only prevention but also certain types of adaptation, especially human migration/relocation of severely impacted populations. Many of the areas being impacted the most quickly are in regions of limited geopolitical power, such as Oceania. Sea level rise is most severely and quickly affecting archipelagic nations in this region which often have limited funds and/or influence to aid in the relocation of populations. Similar problems are arising in regions of prolonged drought and at the extreme desertification. Although these phenomena are affecting some places in the developed world, the worst of the climate impacts will be in the lesser developed world. Human populations crossing geographic regions, often without the explicit permission of sovereign governments, to escape climate change impacts is already a problem in much of the world. Refugees seeking freshwater, and dry, fertile soils is projected to be an ever increasing problem as the world community copes with climate change through to the 2050s and beyond. Will the 21st Century be known in history as the age of the environmental refugee (ecological refugee, ecogee)? More and more it seems it will be with concurrent threats to resource sustainability and geopolitical stability. The loss of habitable lands and freshwater resources coupled with other climate impacts are forcing human exodus from inhabited islands, low-lying coast lands and from drought stricken interior lands. Will migration compound problems of current resource use and scarcity? What policies currently exist to address environmental migration and what need development? Will resource conflicts and international refugees lead to increases in armed conflict and war?

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