

## Media Release - Climate Exiles

### Legal Group Warns International Laws Inadequate to cope with "Climate Exiles"

October 2009

The Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development is warning that international law is inadequate to deal with the millions of people forecast to become "climate exiles" in the face of escalating climate change.

At its twentieth anniversary event later today, FIELD will highlight how international legal frameworks are unprepared to deal with the victims of climate change. Although estimates vary, between 200 million and one billion people could become displaced by climate change by 2050. Although some of these figures have been questioned, it is clear that the international community needs to prepare for the likelihood that some small islands countries and low-lying territories will be lost.

As climate exiles have no standing in existing international law, this raises unprecedented legal challenges says FIELD. There are currently no legal frameworks or guidelines that can provide assistance or protection for people crossing borders because of displacement due to climate change.

Climate change is expected to hit developing countries the hardest. Its effects-higher temperatures, rising sea levels, food insecurity and more frequent weather-related disasters-pose risks for agriculture, food, and water supplies causing chaos for millions of people. The so-called 'climate hotspots' - low lying islands, coastal regions, large river deltas and underdeveloped regions - remain in danger of catastrophic environmental change.

Particularly vulnerable are small island states. The entire population of the Carteret Islands of Papua New Guinea, are the first people to be evacuated due to climate change. Others, such as Kiribati or the Marshall Islands, may disappear completely or become uninhabitable making their populations stateless. Kiribati has already started searching for a new home for future generations.

Under current international law, any climate-induced, cross-border migrations from these areas would trigger little if any protection or provide aid.

FIELD Director Joy Hyvarinen says: "International refugee law focuses on those who are persecuted for political, racial or religious reasons. It was not designed for those who are left homeless by environmental pressures."

"Migration in itself is not bad, but migration forced by climate change is a tragedy and the international legal framework needs to be adjusted to help climate exiles and deal with statelessness and compensation."

**Editors' Notes:**

1. The Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development is a group of public international lawyers providing legal aid and pro bono services to vulnerable countries and communities that face environmental impacts.
2. [The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, \(IPCC\)](#) has suggested that more than 600 million people currently living in low-lying coastal zones - 438 million in Asia and 246 million in least developed countries - will be directly at risk to potential threats of climate change in this century.
3. Research by FIELD's sister organisation, the [International Institute for Environment and Development](#) (IIED) indicates a need for a nuanced approach to concerns about climate-related migration. For example, short term and short distance movements are more likely to increase and the most vulnerable people may find it impossible to migrate as they lack the funds and social support. The international legal framework still needs to be adjusted to take account of those who will migrate across borders.

**Contacts:** [field@field.org.uk](mailto:field@field.org.uk)