

September 8, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

As leaders of refugee resettlement and policy organizations, we request that your administration follow through on pledges to lead on climate change and migration solutions. We believe you have powerful administrative tools at your disposal that can extend relief and bring to safety thousands of people directly impacted by climate change today.

We applaud the efforts made to explore ways in which your administration can lead on climate change and migration issues, including writing the White House's "Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration."¹ The report acknowledges that "[t]he United States has a compelling national interest in strengthening global protection for individuals and groups displaced by the impacts of climate change" and recognizes that "[t]here is an interplay between climate change and various aspects of eligibility for refugee status." The urgency of the climate crisis necessitates that this acknowledgement be turned into policy action.

We believe you could build on previous Presidential Determinations (PD) that have already acknowledged that climate change is a significant issue for different populations of concern by taking steps to incorporate consideration of climate impacts into processing for those qualified for refugee resettlement in the United States. For example, the amended 2021 PD notes that displacement in Central America "is driven by widespread violence compounded by limited economic opportunities, poverty, poor governance, corruption, and the effects of a changing climate that exacerbates food insecurity." "Climate change induced displacement" was also noted in the FY2022 PD and its discussion of Central America—"where displacement is driven by widespread violence and compounded by...the effects of a changing climate that exacerbates food insecurity and extreme weather events that can result in displacement."

¹ The White House. "Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration," The White House, October 2021, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report-on-the-Impact-of-Climate-Change-on-Migration.pdf>

Priority 2 (P-2) group designations² would be one way to begin to incorporate climate change considerations into refugee resettlement processing. Climate change is exacerbating existing humanitarian crises around the world. In some cases, those already awaiting or who are qualified for resettlement are at increased risk from climate impacts.³

Given this, we urge you to consider climate change as a factor by designating the following populations of concern for P-2 status in the FY2023 PD:

- **South Sudanese and Ethiopian refugees in Sudan.** Recurring drought and floods exacerbated by climate change are a perennial threat to temporary refugee camps in Sudan. In 2021, the United Nations reported that flooding displaced over 314,000 people across Sudan and resulted in the loss of lives, homes, crops, and livestock. Some refugee camps were hit particularly hard, including Alganaa camp in White Nile state, which hosts 280,000 South Sudanese refugees;⁴ and Tunaydbah and Um Rakuba camps, which host some 20,000 refugees from the Tigrayan region of Ethiopia each.⁵ While 2021 was a difficult year, UNHCR predicts that flooding will continue to threaten refugee camps in Sudan for a variety of reasons. For example, Tunaydbah is built on unstable soil which flooding can substantially weaken; and Um Rakuba is located in a valley, which makes it highly susceptible to flash flooding in the future.⁶
- **Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.** The Rohingya people have faced genocide at the hands of the Myanmar military and most continue to seek safe haven in Bangladesh. Climate change is exacerbating their plight. Given the location of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, including in highland areas prone to flooding and mudslides, and on the island of Bhasan Char, which is in the path of recurring cyclones, the immediate threat of climate disasters requires fast-tracking the resettlement of this population of concern. In 2021, for example, flash flooding and strong winds killed six Rohingya refugees and affected more than 12,000 refugees and 2,500 shelters in Cox's Bazar. More than 800,000 Rohingya refugees live in

² A P-2 designation creates access to the U.S. refugee resettlement program by virtue of the specific circumstances of a defined group of refugees of humanitarian concern who share an apparent need for resettlement as a whole. In this case, P-2 can be implemented using UNHCR group submission methodology. A P-2 designation does not change the adjudication standard.

³ Navin Singh Khadka. "Refugees at 'increased risk' from extreme weather," *BBC*, 1 Dec 2019, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-50692857>.

⁴ UNHCR. "Refugees count their losses as floods destroy camp in Sudan," 23 Nov 2021, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2021/11/619c9aea4/refugees-count-losses-floods-destroy-camp-sudan.html>

⁵ UNHCR. "Extreme weather leaves Ethiopian refugees vulnerable in eastern Sudan," 14 May 2021, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2021/5/609d0c7f4/extreme-weather-leaves-ethiopian-refugees-vulnerable-eastern-sudan.html>

⁶ Sara Jerving. "Rains could devastate camps hosting refugees from Ethiopia," *Devex*, 9 Feb 2021, available at: <https://www.devex.com/news/rains-could-devastate-camps-hosting-refugees-from-ethiopia-99074>.

precarious locations in Bangladesh which are prone to heavy rains and flooding.⁷ In Bhasan Char, where 29,116 Rohingya refugees currently live, the next tropical cyclone could be disastrous.⁸ The United States should work with Bangladesh to facilitate resettlement.

- **Hondurans and Guatemalans who face persecution from departments most affected by hurricanes and drought.** Many Guatemalans and Hondurans face persecution because of a lack of effective state protection from violence at the hands of non-state actors. Environmental disasters in the region have compounded such persecution, as livelihoods become more precarious and in some cases rendered the environment unsafe to live in.

For five consecutive years, prolonged dry spells and excessive rains devastated maize and bean crops in Honduras and Guatemala, increasing food insecurity and decreasing the countries' export commodities.⁹ In late 2020, Hurricanes Eta and Iota devastated both countries, affecting more than 7 million people.¹⁰ Climate change hotspots also often intersect with high rates of violence, especially in the departments of Huehuetenango, Quiché, and San Marcos in Guatemala,¹¹ and Colón and Olancho in Honduras.¹²

Designating these populations for P-2 status would fulfill the U.S. promise to increase and strengthen resettlement for Central Americans.

Assigning these groups with P-2 designations would enable them to be out of harm's way from the most devastating effects of climate change which exacerbate the underlying refugee protection reasons for their flight to seek safety.

⁷ UNHCR. "Deadly floods and landslides hit Rohingya camps in Bangladesh," 28 Jul 2021, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2021/7/61015b864/deadly-floods-landslides-hit-rohingya-camps-bangladesh.html>

⁸ Dhaka Tribune. "1,500 more Rohingyas reach Bhasan Char," 31 March 2022, available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/nation/2022/04/01/1500-more-rohingyas-reach-bhasan-char>

⁹ National Intelligence Council. 2021. "National Intelligence Estimate: Climate Change and International Responses Increasing Challenges to US National Security Through 2040," available at: https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIE_Climate_Change_and_National_Security.pdf

¹⁰ U.S. Agency for International Development. "Latin America - Storms," Fact Sheet #10, 29 January 2021, available at: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/01.29.2021_-_USAID-BHA_Latin_America_Storms_Fact_Sheet_10.pdf

¹¹ Sarah Bermeo and David Leblang. 2021. *Honduras Migration: Climate Change, Violence, & Assistance*, Policy Brief, Duke University, available at: <https://dcid.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/03/Honduras-Migration-Policy-Brief-Final.pdf>

¹² Sarah Bermeo, David Leblang, and Gabriela Nagle Alverio. 2021. "Rural poverty, climate change, and family migration from Guatemala," Brookings Institution, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2022/04/04/rural-poverty-climate-change-and-family-migration-from-guatemala/>

It would also make the United States the first country in the world to implement such measures—demonstrating our leadership and commitment to addressing this issue. We note, however, that this is just one of the many policy options that the administration should pursue to address the intersection of climate change and migration.

We welcome your review and the opportunity to meet with you or your staff to answer any questions and to provide further information. Should you have any questions, please feel free to be in touch with Kayly Ober, Senior Advocate, Climate Displacement Program, Refugees International (kayly@refugeesinternational.org).

Sincerely,

1. Eric Schwartz, Former President, Refugees International & Maureen White, Interim President, Refugees International
2. Erol Kekic, Senior Vice President, Programs, Church World Service
3. Nisha Agarwal, Deputy Executive Director, International Refugee Assistance Project
4. Nili Sarit Yossinger, Executive Director, Refugee Congress
5. Rachel Perić, Executive Director, Welcoming America
6. Sarah Costa, Executive Director, Women’s Refugee Commission
7. Vittoria Zanuso, Executive Director, Mayors Migration Council
8. Eskinder Negash, President and CEO, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
9. James Cavallaro, Executive Director, University Network for Human Rights
10. Nicole Melaku, Executive Director, National Partnership for New Americans
11. Melanie Nezer, Senior Vice President, Global Public Affairs, HIAS
12. Amali Tower, Founder and Executive Director, Climate Refugees
13. Michael Breen, President and CEO, Human Rights First
14. Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, President and CEO, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services