

Climate crisis and the UK's Rwanda refugee policy

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Christian Aid is a Christian organisation that insists the world can and must be swiftly changed to one where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty.

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Cover: Pedestrians and motorists transport passengers in a flooded road in Kigali on 28 January 2020. Carrying people was one of the ways to transport them past the flooded areas in late January and early February. Emmanuel Kwizera

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Foreword

By John Sentamu, Chair of Christian Aid and former Archbishop of York



The Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, recently described the vision of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda as her “dream” and “obsession”. This may be her dream but it is a nightmare for those refugees who have come to the UK seeking sanctuary from persecution.

The Government’s decision to deport refugees seeking asylum to Rwanda is abhorrent and has been widely criticised

for being a dereliction of our human rights responsibilities. It’s clear to me this is the case and it’s a shameful moral failure by our Government that they seek to send vulnerable people to a country with numerous human rights concerns.

As a proud African I have a great love for my continent but I’m also aware it faces many challenges, not least a climate crisis not of its own making. Rwanda is going to become an increasingly inhospitable place in the coming decades due to climate change, as the Government’s own findings, and this report, shows. The fact that the Home Office hasn’t even done a risk assessment on the climate dangers posed to refugees it plans to deport there, reveals its lack of care and concern for their wellbeing.

Africa doesn’t need our refugees, it needs investment to accelerate its clean energy development, funding to ensure people can adapt to a changing climate they did not create and a fund to compensate them for the devastating climate loss and damages which cannot be adapted to.

Refugees are not a problem to be dealt with, but an opportunity for us help people in great need. We should respond with pragmatism and compassion, not paranoia and fear mongering. The money being spent on dystopian military and surveillance infrastructure¹ should go instead toward supporting safe and legal routes and procedures for people who need to move.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is known as the golden rule. It’s the most basic moral principle. If we were in need of refuge we would not want to be sent thousands of miles to the front line of the climate crisis. That is not a future we should be imposing on vulnerable people seeking sanctuary in the UK.

Introduction

The UK Government's controversial policy of sending asylum seekers that enter the UK to Rwanda - which already plays host to over 100,000 refugees from the region - has received much criticism for a variety of reasons which could endanger refugees who are sent there.

Until now there has been little discussion of the threat that climate change could play to the lives of refugees who, on reaching the shores of the UK would be sent to a climate vulnerable country, close to the equator where rising temperatures could cause them great hardship.

This report highlights that even the UK Government's own assessment of the climate risk affecting Rwanda makes it a dangerous and unsuitable country to send refugees who are trying to rebuild their lives.

Despite this, a Freedom of Information request to the Home Office by Christian Aid has revealed that no risk assessment was carried out to consider the impact of climate change in Rwanda on asylum seekers being sent there.

The FOI response stated: "We have carried out a thorough search and we have established that the Home Office does not hold the information which you have requested relating to a specific risk assessment on the impact of climate change for relocated individuals transferred to Rwanda."

The *Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative* ranks nearly every country in order of its ability to withstand climate impacts, with Norway at number 1 the least vulnerable. Rwanda comes in 124th out of 182 nations.²

Elsewhere the World Bank is clear about the climate threats posed to Rwanda: It's 2021 country profile for the country states: "Rwanda is at risk to numerous natural hazards and include droughts, floods, earthquakes, landslides, storms (windstorms, lightning, rainstorms and thunderstorms), wildfire, diseases, and epidemics. These events have had significant impacts on the lives and livelihoods of Rwandans."

Already climate change is forcing people to migrate to avoid climate change impacts such as sea level rise and exposure to drought, floods and storms. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre warns that displacement by weather related disasters is regularly reaching around 25 million people each year, which is three times higher than people displaced by conflicts and violence.³ As climate change gets worse, particularly affecting people living close to the equator where temperature increases are more acutely felt, migration is going to be an increasingly needed form of climate adaptation.

Within a few decades Rwanda could face such an inhospitable climate that people are forced to leave, making it an unsuitable place to be sending refugees trying to build new lives.

UK Govt acknowledges climate threat to Rwanda

As hosts of COP26 and the first major economy to commit to reaching net zero emissions by 2050, the UK Government claims to take the climate crisis seriously.

However the Rwanda refugee policy suggests a lack of joined up thinking across Government with the Home Office seemingly oblivious to the Government's own assessment of the climate risk in East Africa, published earlier this year.

A joint report by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Met Office and Overseas Development Institute lays out the stark climate threats which face Rwanda and any refugees the UK deports there.

The report, *Climate risk report for the East Africa region*⁴, published in 2022, outlines the following dangers for Rwanda:

"Flood risks in urban areas and infrastructure. Heavy rainfall and soil erosion which threatens food security. Household water security in the eastern, drier part of the country. Health risks related to changing patterns of vector borne disease transmission and higher temperatures."

Further on, the report outlines a number of different dangers Rwanda will face from climate change:

Rising temperatures and heatwaves

The report says:

- "Temperatures are projected to increase in each month of the year, and similar increases are also projected in daily minimum and daily maximum temperatures. The frequency and intensity of hot extremes is also projected to increase, which means that heatwave conditions may increase. This will exacerbate heat-health related illness and heat-related mortality, particularly for vulnerable people and in urban environments."

Food security

The report states that the rising temperatures will be a threat to food security. Among its findings:

- "The threat of the coffee berry borer may also become a serious threat in coffee-growing regions of Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. Wheat crops may also be impacted due to shortening of the growth period.

- "Potato, which is a major root crop in the Kenyan, Rwandan, and Tanzanian highlands, is more sensitive to climate change. Potato yield is expected to decline due to heat and water stress in most East Africa countries."

- "In highland perennial systems, major cash crops will be affected by changes in rainfall intensity and timing. For instance, optimal tea-growing areas in Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya will move to higher altitudes, mirroring climate pressures on coffee production. Increased variability is likely to result in increased runoff and greater

flood risks, which creates undesirable conditions for tea cultivation; studies have shown that high, low, and uneven distribution of rainfall reduces yield.”

- “During times of drought or floods, agricultural production fluctuates sharply, as it did in 2016 in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Somalia.”

Flood risk

The Government's report particularly singles out Rwanda, known as the 'land of a thousand hills', as being vulnerable to lethal flood risk and landslides in the capital Kigali. It says:

- “Flooding risk in other parts of the region, particularly in cities such as Kigali and Kampala is also expected to increase due to the projected increase in the frequency and intensity of heavy precipitation events.

- “Over the coming decades, we would expect to see repeated cycles of droughts and floods leading to the same kinds of loss and damage, but potentially exacerbated by more intense rainfall events, and greater exposure of populations living in flood prone areas. In those areas with steeper slopes and degraded catchments, landslides and mudslides will likely grow in significance. In Rwanda, for example, roughly 40% of the population currently live on slopes exposed to landslide risk, with an estimated 23% of the national budget potentially absorbed by relief and rehabilitation.”

World Bank outlines grave climate dangers

Other assessments of Rwanda's climate future paint an equally bleak picture. Last year's Christian Aid published *Lost and Damaged*, which calculated the impact on future GDP by countries due to climate change. It showed that with current policies, Rwanda is expected to take a GDP hit of 15.7% in 2050, and over 55% in 2100.⁵

The World Bank's *Climate Risk Country Profile for Rwanda*, published in 2021, warns that droughts, floods, landslides, wildfires and storms, not to mention earthquakes and diseases, have driven conflict and pose a threat to the country's food security.⁶ It says: “Given projected climate change trends, Rwanda and the surrounding region is expected to be a hotspot of food insecurity in the future, which limits opportunities for import. This may result in significant economic losses, damage to agricultural lands and infrastructure as well as human casualties.”

The World Bank also cite the *Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative* (ND-GAIN) created by Notre Dame University.⁷ This index ranks 182 countries, combining their vulnerability to climate change as well as their resilience to it. The more vulnerable a country is the lower their score, while the more ready a country is to improve its resilience the higher it will be. Norway has the highest score and is ranked 1st.

On its vulnerability index, Rwanda is the joint tenth most vulnerable country in the world at 172 out of 182 countries. When its ability to adapt to some of these impacts is factored in the overall GAIN Index placing for Rwanda is 124 out of 182 countries. At 124th Rwanda sits between Libya and the Solomon Islands.

The World Bank report says the following about Rwanda's current climate and its impact on people living there:

- "Rwanda is at risk to numerous natural hazards and include droughts, floods, earthquakes, landslides, storms (windstorms, lightning, rainstorms and thunderstorms), wildfire, diseases, and epidemics. These events have had significant impacts on the lives and livelihoods of Rwandans. Since the early 2000s, the frequency and severity of disasters, particularly caused by floods, landslides and droughts, have significantly increased, with increasing impact of human casualties as well as economic and environmental losses. In Rwanda, the effects of flood hazards have worsened as recent population growth and land scarcity have pushed people to settle in flood-prone areas. Heavy rainfall events and at times flash flooding, have become increasingly common. Heavy rainfall events are especially common in northern and western provinces, and cause flooding, flash flood events and can trigger landslides and mudslides, leading to infrastructure damage and death. Additionally, nearly 70% of Rwanda's population is exposed to magnitude 6.0 earthquakes; 30% is exposed to magnitude 5.0 earthquakes. In 2008, two earthquakes occurred within hours of one another (magnitudes 6.1 and 5.0), killing nearly 40 people and destroying 1,201 homes in the hardest hit districts of Rusizi and Nyamasheke."
- "Drought hazard are particularly of concern to the districts of Kayonza, Gatsibo, Kirehe, Nyagatare, Rwamagana, Ngoma and Bugesera in the eastern province. The highlands of the Congo-Nile Ridge in the Western, Southern and Northern provinces are prone to landslide due to their moderate to very high slope susceptibility and heavy rainfall in the area. While flooding is expected to occur across much of the country, areas which are particularly vulnerable to flooding are Nyabarongo, Sebeya, Nyabisindu, Mukungwa, and Kagitumba. Given the country's many hills, plateaus, and sloping areas Rwanda is also highly exposed to landslides. Approximately 40% of the population is exposed to landslides due to residing in highly vulnerable areas in the highlands of the western, southern and northern provinces.³⁹ Increased food insecurity is also of specific concern following disasters which result in land and infrastructure degradation due to erosion, direct crop failure due to floods and heavy rains, and possible nutrient leaching, and fungal growth due to increased humidity. Water availability will be affected by possible periods of drought in southern zones. This is expected to have significant consequences for the hardest hit regions due to poor crop and livestock performance."

The World Bank says climate trends suggest conditions are likely to get worse:

- "Climate change trends in Rwanda are expected to increase the risk and intensity of flooding through increased frequency and intensity of heavy rainfall events. Additionally, the country's eastern and central areas are expected to experience increased aridity and drought, with significant impact on livelihoods. Droughts have

already resulted in famine, population displacement, conflicts, and biodiversity loss. Seasonal droughts are expected to be prolonged, which will cause problems especially in the east and southeast of the country. The country has experienced major floods over consecutive years (2006–2009), which has resulted in serious health problems, displacement, large scale erosion, and damage to infrastructure. Changes in rainfall with increased temperature and increases in floods and droughts will impact food security and water availability. Increased incidence of extreme rainfall may also result in soil erosion and water logging of crops, thus decreasing yields and increasing food insecurity. Given projected climate change trends, Rwanda and the surrounding region is expected to be a hotspot of food insecurity in the future. This may result in significant economic losses, damage to agricultural lands and infrastructure as well as human casualties. Land degradation and soil erosion, exacerbated by recurrent flood adversely impacts agricultural production, disproportionately affecting the livelihoods of the rural poor. Food security will be influenced because of the vulnerability of some crops to increasing temperatures and/or water stress. In Rwanda, the most food insecure regions of the country are the west and central south.”

- “Climate change, deforestation, watershed degradation, land use, urbanization and widespread settlements into flood and landslide-prone areas have already exacerbated issues and impacts from flooding and droughts and have also increased the risk of wildfires. Heavy rainfall can also trigger riverine and flash floods. Heavy rainfall and flash floods are common in the country's hill areas and can also trigger landslides and mudslides. Additionally, water stress during the traditional dry periods (June to August) may be further exacerbated with competing demands from household consumption and agriculture. Infrastructure projects are being developed to enable the construction of dams and irrigation networks. Increased heat will further strain existing water resources and impacts from changing rainfall patterns.”

Rwandan Government figures have also acknowledged its climate vulnerability.

At a meeting of the Climate Vulnerable Leaders' Event in Bangladesh in October 2020, Rwanda's Minister of Environment, Dr. Jeanne d'Arc Mujawamariy, said:

“For most vulnerable countries, mainly least developed ones and small island developing states, climate change adaptation must also lay at the heart of their National Planning agenda and the response to the climate crisis.

“This is especially evident in Rwanda, as from January to October 2020, climate-related hazards have claimed more than 200 lives and destroyed houses, growth and infrastructure. These disasters have had significant economic losses to the community and the country at large, and have kept climate change front and center of the policy agenda in Rwanda.”⁸

Parts of Africa will become inhospitable if current climate trends continue

The climate conditions which are set to impact Rwanda means that it may prove inhospitable to the asylum seekers deported there from the UK or their descendants. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's 6th Assessment Working Group II report, *Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, published in February 2022, warned that parts of the world would become uninhabitable.

It states: "Under all global warming levels, some regions that are presently densely populated will become unsafe or uninhabitable, with movement from these regions occurring autonomously or through planned relocation" (TS C.6.7)

In the chapter on Africa it says that the continent is particularly vulnerable to climate induced migration:

"Climate-related displacement is widespread in Africa, with increased migration to urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa linked to decreased rainfall in rural areas, increasing urbanisation and affecting household vulnerability" (IPCC report section 9.9.1)

Temperature rise increased African asylum applications to European countries

In fact, according to a study cited by the IPCC report, recent evidence suggests hotter-than-normal temperatures across 103 countries, including many in Africa, has increased asylum applications to the European Union.

In the study *Asylum applications respond to temperature fluctuations*, Missirian and Schlenker analysed the relationship between these localised shocks to agriculture and applications by that country's migrants for asylum in the European Union. When temperatures in the source country deviated from a moderate optimum around 20°C that is best for agriculture, asylum applications increased.⁹

Assuming no change in present-day vulnerability, asylum applications are projected to increase 34% across Africa (relative to 2000–2014) at 2.2°C global warming. (Box 9.8 Climate change, migration and displacement in Africa - tech summary)

Missirian and Schlenker also calculated the projected increase in asylum applications across countries beyond Africa. In total their study examined 103 countries and found that holding everything else constant, asylum applications by the end of the century are predicted to increase, on average, by 28% (98,000 additional asylum applications per year) under representative concentration pathway

(RCP) scenario 4.5 and by 188% (660,000 additional applications per year) under RCP 8.5. The RCP 4.5 scenario equates to an average rise in global temperature between 2C and 3C by 2100 compared to pre industrial levels. The scenario of RCP 8.5 would see greenhouse gas emissions continuing to rise throughout the century and result in global temperature rise of more than 4C by 2100.

Migration is an essential form of climate adaptation

The IPCC acknowledges that migration is already an essential form of adaptation for people facing the reality of the climate crisis. The need to move is only going to become more urgent over the coming decades until we stop emitting greenhouse gasses and begin to reverse the effects of climate change.

The Red Cross said in its report on climate displacement that in 2020, 30.7 million people were internally displaced by disasters, over three times more than by conflict and violence. 98 per cent of all disaster-related displacement was in the context of weather and climate hazards – mostly floods and storms, but also wildfires, landslides, extreme temperatures and drought.

While climate change affects everyone, it disproportionately affects the poorest and most vulnerable, most of whom have done the least to cause the problem.

Rather than seeing climate induced displacement as a problem to be managed, with vast sums of public money spent on border security, and deportation flights to Rwanda, richer countries should be doing more to help those in need.

Recommendations

- End the Rwanda resettlement scheme - The Rwanda refugee policy has failed to account for the climate risks posed to refugees being sent there, both to them and their descendants. With no climate risk assessment carried out by the Home Office, despite the clear warnings from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other expert bodies, we urge the Government to end the policy and find a much safer and more humane approach to dealing with asylum seekers in the UK.
- Do more to provide financial support to vulnerable countries - The finding that higher temperatures lead to greater projected asylum applications to European nations suggests that there is real need for greater investment in climate adaptation and loss and damage payments to ensure people can respond with the impacts of climate change in the countries where they live. The need for a specific fund to compensate for the permanent loss and damage caused by climate change is building momentum and the UK Government should join those formally backing the idea.
- The UK Government was the first major economy to set a net zero goal and has led the way in encouraging others to follow suit. Rwanda and other African countries need to see the historic polluters in the global north to reduce their emissions and end the harm we are doing to the poorest, and least responsible people on earth. Exploring for new fossil fuels in the North Sea and attempting to restart fracking is condemning climate vulnerable communities like Rwanda to a grim fate. Instead we should be harnessing the benefits of renewable energy.

Gaia Vince, the author of *Nomad Century: How Climate Migration Will Reshape Our World*, writes:

"The world already sees twice as many days where temperatures exceed 50C than 30 years ago – this level of heat is deadly for humans, and also hugely problematic for buildings, roads and power stations. It makes an area unliveable. This explosive planetary drama demands a dynamic human response. We need to help people to move from danger and poverty to safety and comfort – to build a more resilient global society for everyone's benefit."

End notes

- ¹ <https://www.computerweekly.com/feature/English-Channel-surveillance-used-to-deter-and-punish-migrants>
- ² <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>
- ³ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/events/human-displacement-in-the-context-of-extreme-weather-events-and-climate-change>
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- ⁸ <https://thecvf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Statement-Rwanda.pdf>

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