

# Climate of Coercion

## Environmental and Other Drivers of Cross-Border Displacement in Central America and Mexico

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, International Refugee Assistance Project,  
and Human Security Initiative

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## Executive Summary

Climate-driven disasters can intersect with and exacerbate targeted violence, conflict, and other forms of persecution that drive people to leave their homes and cross borders to seek humanitarian protection. The Global Compact on Refugees [recognizes](#) that “climate, environmental degradation and natural disasters increasingly interact with the drivers of refugee movements.” And, as a recent White House report [acknowledges](#), “[t]here is an interplay between climate change and various aspects of eligibility for refugee status.”

However, instead of access to protections enshrined in international human rights law, people seeking safety across borders are often met with pushback policies by states seeking to prevent, contain, or reverse their movements. Such policies expose displaced people to further violence. They also drive migrants and asylum seekers into dangerous terrain made even more perilous by rising temperatures and intensifying precipitation patterns. Thus, in addition to mixing with other root causes of migration, climate change is increasingly making the journey itself more treacherous.

This report analyzes the intersection of climate change and climate-related disasters with other root causes of movement across borders for people who have traveled to the United States-Mexico border from Central America and other parts of Mexico to seek U.S. humanitarian protection. It is based on 38 interviews in Tijuana shelters with Guatemalan, Honduran, Mexican, and Salvadoran individuals who intend to seek U.S. asylum, conducted in Spanish in January 2023 by Human Security Initiative (HUMSI) and a team of Stanford Law School students. All of the individuals interviewed were stranded in Mexico awaiting the opportunity to obtain an exemption to the Title 42 policy, which blocks asylum access at U.S. ports of entry. Publicly available data, news media, and academic and civil society reports also informed this report.

The research team found that many asylum seekers have experienced devastating climate-related disasters such as hurricanes, droughts, and floods, which exacerbated their conditions of vulnerability. Some interviewees cited the destruction of their homes, agricultural lands, and businesses due to climate-related causes as contributing to their decisions to flee. As illegal border [pushback](#) policies make travel increasingly unsafe, many asylum seekers reported encountering climate-related adverse weather as well as violence and extortion as they traveled to the border.

While new policies to address cross-border displacement are urgently needed on a global scale, this report focuses on steps the U.S. government can take to protect displaced people impacted by the climate crisis who are seeking U.S. protection. U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), and HUMSI recommend that the United States:

- Adopt climate-specific protection and resettlement pathways;
- Explore the use of U.S. Refugee Admissions Program priority designations to facilitate entry of climate-affected refugees;
- Normalize climate considerations in Temporary Protected Status designations and extensions;
- End pushback policies and restore asylum access at the U.S-Mexico border; and
- Streamline climate considerations into asylum intake procedures.

## Climate-related disasters exacerbate vulnerabilities of displaced people seeking U.S. protection

Climate change is a [threat multiplier](#) that exacerbates the vulnerability of impacted communities by undermining almost every facet of human security — often contributing to difficult but necessary decisions to relocate. Climate-related shocks like droughts, floods, and storms intersect with other root causes of cross-border and internal displacement such as [state fragility](#), [poverty](#), [marginalization of Indigenous populations](#), and threats of [violence and extortion](#). While climate-related displacement often occurs [within countries](#), intersecting threats push people to seek safety across international borders.

In Central America, climate change and climate-related disasters have contributed to the vulnerability of marginalized communities, as [storms, floods, droughts, and other anomalous weather patterns](#) become more frequent and intense. Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November 2020 devastated [Guatemala](#) and neighboring countries — displacing thousands and causing physical and economic damage that lingers to this day. In a stretch of Guatemala to Nicaragua known as the “[Dry Corridor](#),” rural and agriculturally dependent communities are vulnerable to risks associated with climate change that damage economic activity and threaten food security, such as long periods of drought followed by intense rains and floods.

In Mexico, [La Niña effects](#) have driven brutal drought conditions throughout the countryside. Mexican states bordering the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico remain vulnerable to [tropical storms](#), which can become more powerful and last longer with warmer ocean temperatures. Combinations of high heat and humidity also go beyond mere discomfort — scientists warn that [wet-bulb temperatures](#) driven higher by climate change will soon begin to push “our upper physiological limit.” Areas along the Gulf of California and the southern Gulf of Mexico are among the regions that could be rendered uninhabitable in the coming decades by intolerable levels of heat and humidity.

### *Extreme weather patterns tied to climate change threaten livelihoods*

Many asylum seekers interviewed by the research team in Tijuana in January 2023 remarked that climate-related disasters, including extreme heat, droughts, hurricanes, and floods, have become more frequent in recent years. These disasters destroyed crops and forced businesses to close, crippling local economies and driving families into poverty. Many reported that climate disasters interfered with their ability to earn a living during the past two years. For example:

- **A Guatemalan woman whose family fled threats by gang members who killed her son reported that floods from heavy rains over the past two years destroyed her home and heavily damaged the family's chicken farm, leaving them without an income.** When the family's house flooded, they remained there to protect their belongings from looters — sleeping on chairs and tables while water filled the floor. After the storm receded, fungi engulfed the family's house.
- **A Mexican woman fleeing an abusive partner reported that her riverside community was flooded by heavy rains in 2022, forcing her to close her travel agency business and impeding her ability to support her children.** The woman noted that there were more storms that forced the closure of local businesses in 2022 than ever before.
- **Extreme heat has made outdoor work difficult and dangerous.** Several asylum seekers reported suffering heat-related illness or injury while working outside over the past two years, including a

farmer from Guerrero who said that he and other farmers became sick from working in “intense” heat; a Honduran construction worker who was unable to work during unprecedentedly hot summers and who developed a skin condition requiring medical treatment after working during a heat wave; and a Mexican woman who suffered from intense headaches while working on her family’s farm during a period of extreme heat in August 2022.

Many asylum seekers who had been impacted by climate-related disasters in their countries of origin said they received little to no government assistance in their aftermath. For example:

- **A Mexican family received no government assistance after unusually heavy rains in September and October 2022 prevented the mother from working as a strawberry picker and pushed the family into poverty.** “The government didn’t help when we ran out of food. The local government received assistance, but it was only used to feed the family of the mayor,” the mother said.
- **A Honduran man received insufficient government assistance after hurricanes Eta and Iota severely damaged his home, forcing his family to seek shelter elsewhere.** He said the hurricanes destroyed homes, killed residents of his riverside community, and forced many into extreme poverty, but that the Honduran government only paid \$500 Honduran Lempira (about 20 U.S. dollars) to affected individuals. “What can we do with this small amount of money? We lost everything,” he said.
- **A Mexican man whose house and wood cutting business were destroyed by hurricanes received no assistance from the government while gang members continued to extort his family.** He told the research team that he had applied for government aid to rebuild his house, but that his application was denied. “They left me with practically nothing,” he said.

As the White House recognized in its October 2021 [Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration](#), “if a government withholds or denies relief from the impacts of climate change to specific individuals who share a protected characteristic in a manner and to a degree amounting to persecution, such individuals may be eligible for refugee status.”

#### *Climate change increases the influence of organized criminal groups*

Climate disasters and rising temperatures restrict the availability of land, food, and other resources. This economic destruction empowers violent criminal organizations that already control many regions in Mexico and Central America. Several individuals reported that hurricanes had destroyed their homes or businesses, leaving them impoverished and unable to pay extortion fees demanded by violent organized criminal groups. Farmers whose crops were destroyed by hurricanes, droughts, or floods, as well as others who were unable to work during climate-related disasters, reported that cartels continued to demand extortion payments without regard for the economic losses they had suffered. Asylum seekers who experienced climate-related disasters that worsened violence and other persecution include:

- **A Mexican family was driven into poverty after droughts and floods ruined their tomato crops in recent years, contributing to their inability to make extortion payments demanded by the gang controlling the region.** The mother told the research team that, in 2019, there was “too much sun, too much heat. The whole crop dried up. We lost everything.” In subsequent years, heavy rains flooded the tomato plants. “Sometimes you can’t earn anything. Where can one get money when there’s nothing to sell? The gangs keep asking for their bribes, and they don’t care about

these things. If you don't pay, they kill you. They killed a 50-year-old man working in the tomato fields," she said. The family fled after gang members killed the woman's brother and uncle and kidnapped her husband.

- **A Mexican man traveling with his wife and children was unable to pay extortion fees demanded by the gang that controlled his hometown in Michoacán, in part because extreme heat forced the closure of his grocery store for more than two weeks.** He said that the temperatures in his hometown in May 2022 were much higher than in previous years. "There were dust storms and a period of drought like nothing we had ever seen before in this town. It affected us a lot because we couldn't go to work, be outside in the streets, or even sleep at night, since there are no resources for air conditioning," the man told the research team. "During this time, the gang kept asking for extortion payments. One needs to pay them, whether or not there's work. It was very difficult to pay during this time," he added. The family fled after gang members appeared at their home, took what little they had left, and threatened them.
- **A Honduran woman seeking U.S. protection with her sister and their children said that Hurricanes Iota and Eta destroyed her house and her father's dairy business, forcing the family into poverty, while gang members continued to demand extortion payments.** She told the research team that the family had to stay in a shelter until they could afford to move into another house as her father struggled to rebuild the dairy business. "The hurricanes destroyed everything. People in our town died, including children," she said. As extortion threats by gang members on the family's dairy business intensified, the woman's father was forced into hiding. The rest of the family fled after a gang member tried to force the woman's 8-year-old daughter to be his girlfriend. "They said if I didn't give them my daughter they would kill her in front of me," the woman said.
- **A Mexican family fled threats by gang members who terrorized their coastal community after extreme heat and hurricanes flooded the family's home, destroyed their crops, and ravaged their town's farm-based local economy.** "We live off of manual labor on the farms. We couldn't work in the fields. There was not enough food," the mother told the research team. The gang that controls the region continued demanding extortion payments from farmers, even while the storms made them unable to work. "They don't care about the hurricane. They collect the payments just the same," she said. "They killed two of our neighbors who were also fieldworkers because they couldn't pay the extortion fees. They cut one of their throats and hung the other from a wall." After gang members began monitoring and attempting to recruit the woman's teenage son, armed men raided the family's house, forcing the family to flee.
- **A woman from Guatemala fleeing threats by gang members with her children said intensifying hurricanes in recent years have at times forced businesses in her town to close. This has prevented the family members from earning a living at the bakery and gas station where they worked and impeded their ability to pay extortion fees demanded by gangs controlling the area.** The family fled after gang members appeared at the family members' workplaces demanding extortion payments and tried to kidnap the woman's son.

In some regions where climate-fueled disasters have destroyed crops or otherwise crippled local economies, organized criminal groups have profited from the vulnerability of impacted communities,

including by controlling access to necessary supplies and recruiting people no longer able to support themselves. For example, the Sinaloa cartel has [taken control of water distribution](#) in the drought-stricken Mexican state of Chihuahua, where the warming climate has dried up rivers, [destroyed crops](#), and left tens of thousands of farmers in extreme poverty. The cartel [siphons](#) fresh water from lakes and other natural waterways, enabling it to irrigate its own cannabis and poppy fields while also profiting from selling fresh water to local communities. Several asylum seekers interviewed by the research team reported that organized criminal groups had taken advantage of precarious conditions resulting from climate change to exploit their communities, including:

- **A Mexican woman from Guerrero fled with her husband due to threats from gang members who gouged prices of essential supplies after a series of droughts decimated the local maize crops that formed the basis for the community's economy.** She told the research team that gangs took advantage of devastating droughts by driving up the price of seeds, fertilizer, and produce, while closely monitoring and demanding “tax” payments for any supply purchases outside their territory. In recent years, many farmers were unable to afford the supplies needed to plant maize. The woman believed this dynamic has driven more young people, who are no longer able to make a living in the maize fields, to join the gangs for survival.
- **A Mexican family's lemon harvests were depleted by droughts and tornadoes that decimated the local economy and increased the influence of the violent cartel controlling the area.** The father told the research team that due to climate-related disasters, fewer people are able to support themselves in the lemon farming-based community, driving many to join the cartel for survival. The man noted they had seen bodies of presumptive cartel violence victims hanging from trees on their farm more frequently. The family fled after armed men sprayed bullets into their lemon orchards, broke into their house while the family was eating dinner, and demanded extortion payments.
- **A Mexican woman fleeing death threats by gang members in coastal Guerrero said, as intensifying hurricanes have battered the region in recent years, gang members often rob the farmers of mangos, watermelons, and other crops before the hurricanes.** “They steal so they can eat during the storm, leaving the farmers without food,” she said.

### *Climate change contributes to illegal land dispossession*

Droughts, hurricanes, rising sea levels, and other impacts of climate change degrade environments, reducing the availability of land and natural resources in climate-vulnerable regions. Facing more scarce resources, powerful entities including government officials, private developers, and organized criminal groups target the land and natural resources of Indigenous and other marginalized groups. Honduran Garifuna communities experience heightened [discrimination](#) that may exacerbate the persecution they face as a result of illegal encroachments on their land. [IRAP](#) reported that two Black Honduran Garifuna brothers were granted U.S. asylum in 2015 after the government illegally appropriated their tribal lands, leaving them vulnerable to homelessness and gang violence.

Environmental activists [often face persecution](#) for their efforts to defend land from illegal encroachments. For instance, an Indigenous Honduran woman who led efforts to resist illegal government appropriation of tribal land and resources was granted U.S. asylum in 2020, according to

[IRAP](#). The woman had fled Honduras after she was kidnapped, beaten, and sexually assaulted in an effort to coerce her to sign over tribal lands. In addition, in 2022 [Human Rights First](#) interviewed a schoolteacher and human rights activist from the Indigenous Pech people of Honduras who sought U.S. asylum after escaping an assassination attempt by armed men who killed his brother for the family's activism to protect their community's traditional lands. The man had broken his arm jumping out of a window of the school where he worked to escape assailants who shot at him. The research team also interviewed individuals whose land was illegally appropriated, including:

- A Mexican woman whose family led efforts to protect local forests from deforestation by cartel members controlling the region fled with her three young children in December 2022 after members of the cartel murdered her parents, husband, and four of her siblings for their activism. The woman told the research team that there had been more rain and flooding in the area than in previous years, increasing pressure on land resources, and that weather patterns changed dramatically after the cartel deforested the region.
- A Mexican woman fled Guerrero with her daughters in August 2022 after gang members killed the woman's husband in order to appropriate the family's farmland.

### **Climate change and unlawful pushback policies further imperil journeys**

Instead of expanding humanitarian protections or addressing root causes of migration, national governments, including the United States, have responded to arrivals of displaced people by creating new barriers to protection at land borders. Policies that block and push back asylum seekers along their journeys further endanger people seeking protection, including those impacted by climate change. In addition to illegally denying access to protection, these policies subject migrants and asylum seekers to targeted [violence](#) and force them to travel through [harsh terrain](#) made more dangerous by the impacts of climate change.

### *Recently implemented policies restrict asylum access and freedom of movement*

Under [pressure](#) from the United States, the Mexican government has increased enforcement and adopted [policies](#) to make it more difficult for people to transit through the country to reach the U.S. border, including new visa requirements for individuals traveling from [Ecuador](#), [Venezuela](#), and [Brazil](#) that force people to undertake land border crossings through harsh terrain. The Mexican government has carried out [unlawful detentions](#) and [forcible returns](#) of migrants and asylum seekers over the southern border to Guatemala or to the countries they fled. The Mexican government also began restricting bus access within Mexico to travelers with proof of immigration status and requiring migrants and asylum seekers to wait months in southern Mexico for humanitarian visas in order to continue traveling to the United States-Mexico border, leaving thousands trapped in [abhorrent conditions](#).

Pushback policies by the United States also leave migrants and asylum seekers stranded in Mexico, where they face grave dangers and challenging living conditions. Since 2020, the U.S. government has carried out more than [two million](#) expulsions under the Title 42 public health order, expelling migrants and asylum seekers back into Mexico or their countries of origin instead of allowing the adjudication of their asylum claims. A [limited](#) exemption process to Title 42 expulsions is now only accessible through a

finite number of slots via the [difficult-to-access](#) and flawed [CBP One](#) mobile application. This process has invited comparisons to a previous practice referred to as [metering](#), when the U.S. government arbitrarily limited the number of asylum seekers processed at ports of entry. In February 2023, the Biden administration proposed a [rule](#) that would restrict asylum access for individuals who enter the United States without a previously-scheduled appointment as well as for those who do not first seek protection in countries through which they travel on the way to the United States — countries which themselves may have poor records of maintaining access to asylum under international law. This “[asylum ban](#)” — [modeled](#) after Trump-era policies previously [found](#) to be [unlawful](#) — will further endanger asylum seekers and refugees, including those displaced in the context of climate change, by making them ineligible for protection based solely on their manner of entry.

Policies that block asylum access at ports of entry and restrict freedom of movement expose migrants and asylum seekers, including those impacted by climate change, to [targeted](#) violence including kidnappings, extortion, and assault. Indeed, many of the asylum seekers the research team interviewed in Tijuana had experienced violent crime in Mexico. They include a Honduran family fleeing death threats by an organized criminal group who was kidnapped in San Luis Rio Colorado, Mexico and then turned away from U.S. protection at a port of entry due to Title 42; a young Honduran girl who was kidnapped near the Mexico-Guatemala border; and numerous individuals who survived armed robberies. Many of the individuals the research team interviewed also reported that state officers, or individuals claiming to be state officers, boarded their buses demanding extortion payments, sometimes threatening them with deportation. They include a Guatemalan family whom Mexican immigration agents extorted after forcibly removing them from the bus they were riding; a Honduran family from whom Mexican police demanded payments on three separate occasions to be able to continue travel to the U.S. border; a Guatemalan family whom Guatemalan police extorted on the way to the Mexican border; and a Guatemalan family who was extorted by armed, masked men claiming to be Mexican immigration agents who boarded their bus and threatened to kidnap the passengers.

*Policies restricting freedom of movement further expose migrants and asylum seekers to climate change and climate-related disasters*

Restricted access to travel visas and public transit in Central America and Mexico has [forced](#) many asylum seekers and migrants to cross dangerous terrain by foot, making them vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change along the journey to the United States-Mexico border. Restrictions on visa access for air travel to Mexico have [contributed](#) to an unprecedented spike in travel through the infamous Darién Gap — a stretch of remote jungle connecting Colombia and Panama. Crossings [nearly doubled](#) in 2022 from the previous year. Landslides, high heat and humidity, mountainous terrain, and rushing rivers [have injured and killed](#) migrants and asylum seekers that attempt crossing the Darién Gap. Further north, border pushback policies, restrictions on access to bus travel, and other limitations on freedom of movement push migrants and asylum seekers into dangerous terrain made more perilous by warming temperatures. Individuals the research team interviewed who had been impacted by extreme weather while traveling through Central America and Mexico include:

- A Guatemalan family and a Salvadoran family had no choice but to walk through mountains and swim across a dangerous river to enter Mexico after Guatemalan border agents turned their buses away from the port of entry in 2022. Both families were robbed while crossing the river

and young children with the Guatemalan family nearly drowned. “The water was at a high level and very rough,” the mother said.

- **A family from Guatemala experienced heavy rainstorms while traveling through Mexico in 2022.** The family was swarmed by mosquitos during heavy rains along the journey, causing some family members to develop skin conditions.
- **In November 2022, an elderly Guatemalan woman and her family, including young children, spent three weeks sleeping on benches in Hidalgo, Mexico, where they endured rain and hot temperatures,** while awaiting visas to be able to continue traveling by bus to the United States-Mexico border.
- **Two Mexican families became sick after moving from unseasonably hot climates in southern Mexico to cold Tijuana winter weather.** One of the families had spent several cold winter nights sleeping on the streets in Tijuana after numerous shelters that were full to capacity turned them away.

The danger continues for migrants and asylum seekers at the United States-Mexico border, where many remain stranded due to the Title 42 order. Shelters face security [threats](#) and are often at-capacity, leaving many migrants and asylum seekers to sleep in makeshift tent encampments or on the streets. Detention facilities are notoriously overcrowded and [unsafe](#) — with [a March 2023 fire](#) in Ciudad Juárez killing dozens. Extreme weather has caused destruction and exacerbated dangerous conditions in these settings. In January 2022, around the time the research team was conducting interviews, a [bomb cyclone](#) precipitation event affecting California and Baja California flooded the road leading to the Tijuana shelter Embajadores de Jesús, making access to the shelter difficult and dangerous. Shortly after the team’s visit, rainwater [flooded](#) the shelter itself, soaking the mats where many migrants and asylum seekers slept on the floor (because the shelter had run out of bed space). Some became sick as a result. In addition, rainstorms destroyed most of the canvas tents comprising a Tijuana shelter that houses more than 150 Haitian individuals and families, according to Guerline Jozef, executive director of the nonprofit organization Haitian Bridge Alliance (HBA). Jozef said that after HBA replaced the tents destroyed by the January 2023 bomb cyclone, additional rain storms in late February 2023 destroyed the new tents.

Other migrants and asylum seekers unable to enter the United States due to Title 42 have suffered in squalid conditions in makeshift tent encampments in Ciudad Juárez, Matamoros, and Reynosa, where extreme temperature fluctuations have posed further challenges. In December 2022, a winter storm [ravaged](#) the encampments as a “mass of Arctic air” moved over the region, causing freezing temperatures. In March 2023, unseasonable [100-degree heat](#) in the Rio Grande Valley caused hardship for hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers living in makeshift tent encampments in Matamoros, Texas, where a local church has [struggled](#) to provide sufficient drinking water for residents.

### *Rising temperatures further endanger border crossings*

As temperatures rise, attempts to seek protection in the United States have become increasingly deadly. Without access to asylum at U.S. ports of entry or other safe and legal migration pathways, dangerous conditions in Mexico push migrants and asylum seekers toward informal crossings away from official border posts, often through sweltering deserts and across deadly bodies of water. At least 850 migrants and asylum seekers [died](#) crossing the United States-Mexico border in fiscal year 2022, the highest death toll since 1998. The International Organization for Migration [found](#) the United States-Mexico border to

be “the most dangerous land crossing in the world.” U.S.-Mexico border regions saw historically high temperatures and commensurately high migrant death tolls from heat-related illnesses during the past two years. For instance, at least 63 migrants [died](#) crossing the desert near Yuma, Arizona in 2022, where summer temperatures reached a high of 114 degrees Fahrenheit — a higher death toll than ever before and more than twice the number of deaths in the previous year (25). Those who died in the region include an 18-year-old migrant who was found dead in the desert from the heat, and a 93-year-old Nicaraguan man found dead in late December 2022. In addition, many migrants and asylum seekers have died from heat-related illnesses amidst [soaring temperatures in Texas](#) where, during the second hottest summer on record in 2022, temperatures exceeded indexes dangerous to human health more often than ever before.

Rising temperatures are also changing weather patterns, making journeys through waterways more dangerous. [Hundreds of migrants](#) have died crossing the treacherous Rio Grande, which becomes even more dangerous after heavy rainfalls increase water levels and cause stronger currents. Others have died attempting to swim around the United States-Mexico border wall at Playas de Tijuana, including a Russian man and another migrant who [drowned](#) in November 2022. In addition, in March 2023, a boat carrying migrants from Mexico [capsized](#) due to heavy fog and dangerous surf off the coast of San Diego, killing eight people.

### Policy recommendations and considerations

To protect individuals seeking humanitarian protection who have been impacted by climate change, USCRI, IRAP, and HUMSI recommend that the U.S. government:

#### *Adopt climate-specific protection and resettlement pathways*

Existing pathways for people fleeing climate-related disasters are insufficient to address the expected scale of the effects of climate change on human mobility patterns. While the asylum and refugee protection systems offer protection to some individuals impacted by climate change who have also suffered other persecution, there are no [formal protection pathways](#) for climate-displaced people under U.S. law. Temporary designations, such as humanitarian parole, do not offer a systemic response to provide lasting protections to those displaced by climate change.

The White House suggested in [its October 2021 report](#) that the U.S. government “create a new legal pathway for individualized humanitarian protection in the United States for individuals facing serious threats to their life because of climate change.” This complementary protection pathway should provide access to resettlement assistance and a path to citizenship for people displaced in the context of climate change and should not amend or replace existing humanitarian protection programs.

New pathways for protection for those displaced by climate change should provide access to a durable status, work authorization, and naturalization; as well as protect family unity and enable the reunification of non-immediate family members. In addition, these pathways should ensure that individuals in areas at high risk of experiencing severe damage related to climate change — such as low-lying coastal areas or small island developing states — can move before disaster strikes, rather than after. Thus, protection pathways should be a continuation of mitigation and adaptation strategies that seek to assist vulnerable populations before climate-related shocks result in forced displacement.

### *Explore the use of U.S. Refugee Admissions Program priority designations to facilitate entry of climate-affected refugees*

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is the United States' flagship system for welcoming individuals fleeing persecution in their countries of origin. Through USRAP, refugees processed overseas receive access to resettlement benefits and are placed on a path to lawful permanent resident status. Since its inception, USRAP has facilitated the arrival and resettlement of more than 3.4 million refugees across the country. USRAP Priority 2 (P-2) and Priority 4 (P-4) designations may provide avenues for protection for individuals impacted by climate change who also qualify for refugee protection under existing U.S. law.

USRAP P-2 designations reflect a determination that a group is of special humanitarian concern to the United States and that members of the group will likely qualify for admission as refugees under U.S. law. The U.S. government could incorporate climate change considerations into resettlement processing by designating climate vulnerable groups for P-2 status. In a [letter](#) to President Biden, nonprofit organization directors suggest designating climate vulnerable groups for P-2 designations, including Hondurans and Guatemalans impacted by hurricanes and drought. They note that many "face persecution because of a lack of effective state protection... [and] 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."

The [Welcome Corps](#) program, launched in January 2023, enables private individuals, groups, and organizations to directly sponsor people seeking refugee protection with initial resettlement assistance that is typically provided through voluntary resettlement agencies under the USRAP. The [second phase of the program](#), which will begin later in 2023, will allow private individuals and entities to identify refugees to be sponsored and to refer applicants to the USRAP through the new P-4 category. U.S. organizations may work with private sponsor groups in their networks to [identify](#) refugees in line with their mission or area of focus, such as universities sponsoring refugee students or community-based ethnic or affinity organizations' networks sponsoring refugees that align with their area of service. In a similar manner, non-governmental organizations active on climate issues should explore the use of this new program to facilitate the resettlement of refugees affected by climate change and climate-related disasters.

While persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group remains the core requirement for refugee status under domestic and international law, use of the P-2 and P-4 designations have the potential to reach persecuted individuals displaced in the context of a changing climate.

### *Normalize climate considerations in Temporary Protected Status designations and extensions*

[Temporary Protected Status](#) (TPS) extensions and redesignations should explicitly recognize the role of climate change and climate disasters in exacerbating dangerous conditions in designated countries. TPS is a blanket form of humanitarian relief which allows qualifying nationals of designated countries to remain in the United States and obtain work authorization. Countries may be [designated](#) by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for TPS due to armed conflict, environmental disasters, or other "extraordinary and temporary" conditions. In many cases, TPS-designated countries face conflict as

well as climate-related shocks. For instance, countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia are designated for TPS due to conflict and violence in their territories — yet climate-related events such as droughts also contribute to unsafe conditions for return. This dynamic is also present in countries in Central America and the Caribbean designated for TPS, such as Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. DHS should normalize acknowledging the role of climate change in contributing to the extraordinary conditions that make voluntary returns to designated countries unsafe.

Throughout its history, TPS has offered protection to thousands of people from countries impacted by climate-related disasters. However, TPS does [not provide](#) a pathway to lawful permanent residency and TPS beneficiaries are generally ineligible for resettlement benefits by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Furthermore, TPS beneficiaries must reside and be physically present in the United States at the time of a TPS designation to access protection — meaning TPS does not protect individuals [fleeing sudden-onset disasters](#) unless a redesignation of their country is announced at a later date. While TPS is an important tool to provide protection to individuals from specific countries, it should coexist with more systemic and lasting resettlement programs, such as the development of climate-specific pathways or the use of USRAP designations outlined above.

As the White House acknowledged in [its October 2021 report](#) on climate change and migration, the TPS statute could be amended to better protect people from countries impacted by climate change, including removing the requirement that governments of countries experiencing an “environmental disaster” request TPS designation. The TPS program should also be reformed to provide beneficiaries access to resettlement assistance and a path to durable legal status in the United States for long-term beneficiaries.

### *End pushback policies and restore asylum access at the U.S.-Mexico border*

The United States must finally end Title 42 expulsions and other pushback policies and restore access to asylum at land borders in accordance with domestic and international laws. Title 42, a section of U.S. public health code, has been wielded as a [deterrent](#) to transboundary movement and has put migrants and asylum seekers in danger, including those impacted by climate change. Pushback policies like Title 42 illegally block asylum access, [externalize](#) asylum claims to third countries, and violate international *non-refoulement* obligations not to return individuals to countries where they face persecution or torture. These policies also [undermine security](#) at the border, [encourage](#) repeat crossings, and force people seeking protection to cross the border through dangerous terrain controlled by illicit networks and gangs.

Title 42 should not be replaced with a third country asylum ban or any other policy that limits asylum access at the border. Further, DHS should not require pre-registration for asylum access at the border, including through the use of the CBP One application, and should not reimplement any form of metering. Instead, the United States should adopt policies that respect rights enshrined in international humanitarian law and enable people to seek protection at the border safely and with dignity. This includes restarting asylum processing at ports of entry and expanding capacity and infrastructure to process people seeking protection at ports of entry. The U.S. government should avoid the use of detention and coordinate with community-based organizations to provide shelter, legal services, and other aid to ensure the humane treatment of people seeking protection and facilitate their safe transit to sponsors within the United States.

### *Streamline climate considerations into asylum intake procedures*

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) asylum officers and other adjudicators should consider the impact of climate change on other forms of persecution when assessing claims for protection. Climate displaced people may be eligible for refugee protection under numerous protected grounds including political opinion, membership in a particular social group, and/or race and ethnicity. As the White House's [Report on the Impact of Climate Change on Migration](#) recognizes, “[a]lthough displacement as a result of climate change is not itself a basis for a claim for protection under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, people fleeing in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters may, in limited instances, have valid claims for refugee status.” Thus, asylum officers should not assume that the presence of a climate-related claim or an environmental disaster renders an asylum seeker ineligible for protection; rather, officers should be trained to recognize scenarios in which climate change contributes to a valid asylum claim.

Training materials should be utilized to support adjudicating officers in better recognizing valid climate-related asylum claims. These manuals should illustrate where climate-related experiences may, when combined with other eligibility factors, qualify people for asylum under current law. This type of training would curb a potential tendency of adjudicators to dismiss asylum claims which contain climate elements by making clear that individuals displaced by the complex interaction of climate change and discrimination, political persecution, social marginalization, and/or violence may qualify for humanitarian protection.

### **Conclusion**

People seeking U.S. protection face violence and persecution in their countries of origin and en route to the United States-Mexico border. Climate change is actively making these stress factors worse and contributing to forced displacement in Mexico and Central America. The interplay between climate change and other root causes of migration is an important dynamic that should continue to be analyzed from a rights-centered approach.

Through the recommendations outlined in this report, the United States can better protect people displaced in the context of climate change. State authorities in Mexico and Central America should also end pushback policies; hold their officers accountable for violence, extortion, and other rights violations; and provide effective aid for people impacted by climate disasters. Policies to address climate displacement should center the agency of impacted individuals. States must provide sufficient resources for impacted communities to adapt to climate-related shocks in place, relocate internally, or safely move across borders if their circumstances compel them to do so.

Displacement from climate change is not a distant specter for policy makers. It is an ongoing phenomenon that is occurring alongside other trends in forced displacement in tangible ways, as this research shows. In many cases, climate change — in the form of a damaging storm or a failed harvest — plays a key role in asylum seekers’ stories, causing fear and uncertainty and contributing to the persecution driving them to the United States’ southwestern border. It is past time for U.S. immigration policy to address and respond to the root causes of climate-related displacement present in its hemisphere and across the warming world. U.S. policy must shift course from ineffective and inhumane pushback policies to the expansion of safe, sustainable pathways for those who seek protection.

## About this report

This report was written and researched by HUMSI Director Julia Neusner, USCRI Policy Analyst Daniel Salazar, Stanford Law students David Cremins and Charlotte Finegold, IRAP Climate Strategist Ama Francis, and IRAP Policy Assistant Nastaran Far. Stanford Law students Seam Guerin, Vanessa Young Viniegra, Tessa Silverman, Alejandra Soler, and Nathan Tauger contributed additional research and editing assistance. IRAP helped develop the climate-related questions used in interviews in Tijuana shelters.

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