

Climate change is triggering a humanitarian crisis, UN report finds

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“Our people and the planet are getting clobbered by climate change. Nearly half of humanity is living in the danger zone now. Many ecosystems are at the point of no return now. The facts are undeniable,” Antonio Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations (UN) remarked in unveiling the latest international report on the impacts of climate change. “This abdication of leadership is criminal. The world’s biggest polluters are guilty of arson on our only home.”

These words by the UN chief reflect the conclusions of the most detailed examination to date of the ongoing impacts of climate change and the risks ahead. The new report, prepared by 270 scientists from 67 countries under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), is the second of a three-part scientific assessment detailing, respectively, how our climate is changing, the impacts and solutions. This is the sixth such assessment since 1990.

The report represents another sounding of alarm bells that have rung since computer climate models were first developed in the 1970s and 80s. Any further delay in concerted global action on climate change, the report warns, means the world “will miss a brief and rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all.”

The invocation of a potentially “unliveable” future is backed up by the report’s contents, which clarifies that a humanitarian crisis is already unfolding.

“Increasing weather and climate extreme events,” the authors note, “have exposed millions of people to acute food insecurity and reduced water security.” In Africa, for instance, climate change has reduced agricultural productivity by 34 percent over the past six decades. Additional temperature increases will undermine food production and nutrition, especially in vulnerable countries, the report warns.

Further, climate change is “increasingly driving displacement in all regions, with small island states disproportionately affected.” In 2019 alone, 13 million people in Asia and Africa became climate refugees due to flooding and other extreme weather.

In every region of the globe, climate change has already had a major impact on health, including through heat waves, increased vector-borne disease, increased exposure to wildfire smoke, and the breakdown of health care systems during climate disasters. “Climate change and related extreme events will significantly increase ill health and premature deaths from the near- to long-term,” according to the report.

All told, an estimated 3.3 to 3.6 billion people “live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change.” By 2050—in less than three decades—the more than 1 billion people living in low-lying areas of coastal cities will face escalating threats from floods. By the end of the century, half to three-quarters of the world’s population could experience “life-threatening climatic conditions” due to unbearable heat and humidity.

Under such conditions, the ability to adapt to climate extremes reaches its limits. Nonetheless, large-scale measures to improve infrastructure to deal with heat waves, drought and flooding are urgently needed. Projects currently underway, the report notes however, have mostly been “fragmented, small in scale, incremental, sector-specific, designed to respond to current impacts or near-term risks, and focused more on planning rather than implementation.” Implementation of these projects is also highly unequal, with the “largest adaptation gaps exist[ing] among lower-income population groups.”

Attempts by capitalist governments to remedy this inequality through pledges of mutual aid and

commitments by banks to invest in adaptation projects in developing countries have proven grossly inadequate. The devastating impacts of climate disasters are being felt disproportionately by the working class and the poor, particularly through more frequent and devastating extreme weather events such as hurricanes, wildfires and polar vortexes, to name a few.

The report also emphasizes the connection between the impacts on natural systems and human society. The destruction of ecosystems heightens our vulnerability to climate change, limiting adaptation possibilities. Conversely, the widespread pollution in the environment and destruction of habitats leads to increased susceptibility to climate change for the remaining ecosystems.

The consequences for biodiversity are staggering. The report notes that up to 14 percent of all terrestrial and freshwater species face extinction even if global temperatures are limited to an increase of 1.5 C. Under higher warming scenarios, nearly a third of these species could be lost forever. “Climate change has caused substantial damages and increasingly irreversible losses, in terrestrial, freshwater and coastal and open ocean marine ecosystems.”

To limit these catastrophic and irreversible impacts, every fraction of a degree and every year matters. The opportunity to limit warming to 1.5 degrees is still possible but rapidly fading. To get there, a 45 percent reduction in global emissions is needed over the next eight years. However, the current commitments by national governments reaffirmed in Glasgow last year, if met, amount to increased emissions by 14 percent over the same period.

The contrast between the trajectory of capitalism and what is needed to secure a future for humanity on earth is stark. The report comes as governments worldwide abandon any effort to contain a pandemic that has already killed millions and as the major powers ready their nuclear weapons.

The value of the IPCC assessment is not that leaders of capitalist governments will somehow be swayed into action by indisputable evidence of catastrophe on the horizon. Every report detailing with more certainty the grim consequences of climate change is met by utter failure in the annual climate summit rituals. The ruling class has proven its indifference to mass death.

The warnings in the report raise the urgency for the international working class to unite in the fight for socialism and fundamentally reorganize society to meet human need, not profit.



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