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CLIMATE CHANGE AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER IN ARMED CONFLICTS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS

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Abstract

Climate change has emerged as a defining challenge to contemporary international law, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between environmental degradation and armed conflict. Increasingly conceptualized as a "threat multiplier," it does not directly cause conflict but intensifies existing structural vulnerabilities such as resource scarcity, socio-economic inequality, weak governance, and political instability. This paper critically examines the climate–conflict nexus through a legal and interdisciplinary lens, exploring the pathways through which climate change contributes to violence, including displacement, food insecurity, ecological degradation, and state fragility.

The study evaluates the adequacy of existing international legal frameworks—particularly International Humanitarian Law, international environmental law, human rights law, and the global climate regime—in addressing these emerging challenges. It highlights significant normative and institutional gaps, including the limited protection for climate-displaced persons under the 1951 Refugee Convention, the high threshold for environmental war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and the absence of binding mechanisms within the Paris Agreement to address security implications. The paper concludes by advocating for legal reforms that incorporate climate security into international law, strengthen preventive and accountability mechanisms, recognize climate-induced displacement, and promote climate justice. Such an approach is essential for addressing the complex realities of climate-induced conflicts and ensuring sustainable peace in an increasingly fragile global environment.

Keywords: Climate Change; Armed Conflict; Threat Multiplier; International Humanitarian Law; Environmental Governance; Resource Scarcity; Climate Justice.

I. Introduction

The traditional architecture of international law has long been structured around clearly defined categories of war and peace, environment and security, state responsibility and humanitarian protection. However, the accelerating impacts of climate change challenge these conceptual boundaries by introducing complex, interdependent risks that cut across legal regimes.[879] Climate change is no longer confined to environmental discourse; it has become a central determinant of socio-political stability and international security.

[879] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis (2021).

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The notion of climate change as a "threat multiplier" reflects a sophisticated understanding of its role in amplifying existing vulnerabilities.[880] Rather than directly causing conflict, climate change interacts with underlying conditions such as poverty, inequality, demographic pressure, and weak governance, thereby increasing the probability of violence. This perspective has gained increasing recognition within international institutions, particularly the United Nations Security Council, where climate-security linkages are now part of regular deliberations.[881] Scientific findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change further substantiate the connection between climate variability and heightened conflict risks. [882]

This paper examines the climate–conflict nexus through a legal lens, focusing on the capacity of international law to address emerging challenges. It adopts a doctrinal and analytical approach, drawing upon treaties, case law, and scholarly literature to assess the adequacy of existing frameworks and propose reforms.

II. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

A. Environmental Security and Legal Paradigms

Environmental security theory expands the traditional understanding of security by incorporating ecological stability as a prerequisite for peace.[883] Within this framework, environmental degradation is not merely a background condition but an active contributor to instability.

The work of Thomas F. Homer-Dixon provides a foundational understanding of how environmental scarcity contributes to conflict. He identifies two key mechanisms: resource capture, where powerful actors monopolize scarce resources, and ecological marginalization, where vulnerable populations are displaced into fragile environments. These dynamics create conditions ripe for conflict.[884]

B. Multi-Dimensional Pathways

Climate change influences conflict through interconnected pathways:

1. Ecological degradation, reducing resource availability
2. Economic disruption, undermining livelihoods
3. Social dislocation, causing migration and demographic stress
4. Political fragility, weakening state capacity

These pathways interact synergistically, making climate change a systemic risk factor rather than an isolated cause.

III. Climate-Induced Drivers of Conflict

A. Resource Scarcity and Geopolitical Competition

Climate change significantly alters the distribution and availability of natural resources. Water scarcity, in particular, has emerged as a critical driver of conflict, especially in transboundary river basins.[885] As river flows become increasingly unpredictable, states and communities compete for diminishing resources, leading to disputes that may escalate into armed conflict. Similarly, desertification and soil degradation reduce agricultural productivity, intensifying competition over arable land. In agrarian economies, such pressures can destabilize entire regions.

B. Climate-Induced Displacement

One of the most visible consequences of climate change is large-scale displacement. However, individuals displaced by environmental factors fall outside the scope of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which is limited to persecution-based claims.[886]

[880] Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, Environment, Scarcity, and Violence (Princeton Univ. Press 1999),
[881] United Nations Security Council, U.N. Doc. S/PV.7730 (2016) (debate on climate and security).
[882] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (2022).
[883] Barry Buzan, People, States and Fear (Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991).
[884] Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, supra note 2.
[885] Aaron T. Wolf, Shared Waters: Conflict and Cooperation, 32 Ann. Rev. Env't & Resources 241 (2007).
[886] 1951 Refugee Convention, art. 1A (2), July 28, 1951, 189 U.N.T.S. 137.

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This legal gap leaves millions without protection, particularly in conflict-prone regions where displacement exacerbates existing tensions. The absence of a coherent legal framework raises serious questions about the adequacy of international refugee law.

C. Food Insecurity and Political Instability

Climate change disrupts agricultural systems, leading to food shortages and price volatility. Food insecurity has historically been linked to civil unrest and political instability. In fragile states, such disruptions can trigger widespread violence.[887]

D. Climate Disasters and State Fragility

Extreme weather events can overwhelm state capacity, particularly in developing countries. Infrastructure damage, economic losses, and humanitarian crises weaken governance structures, creating conditions conducive to conflict.[888]

IV. Case Study Analysis

A. Syria: Environmental Stress and Conflict

The Syrian civil war illustrates the indirect role of climate change in conflict dynamics. A prolonged drought between 2006 and 2010 led to widespread crop failure, rural displacement, and urban overcrowding. These conditions exacerbated existing socio-political tensions, contributing to unrest.[889]

B. Sahel Region: Chronic Environmental Vulnerability

The Sahel Region exemplifies the intersection of climate change and conflict. Desertification and water scarcity have intensified competition between pastoralists and farmers, leading to recurring violence.[890]

V. International Legal Frameworks: A Critical Evaluation

A. International Humanitarian Law

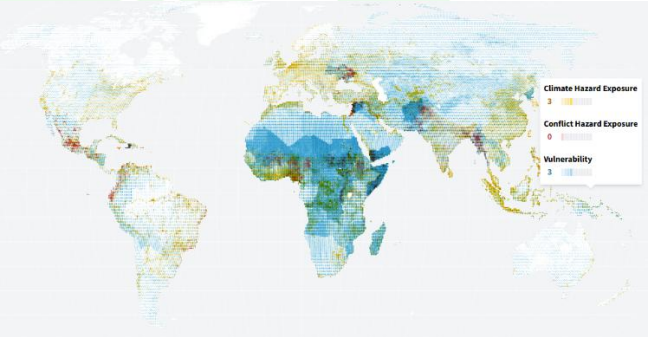
International Humanitarian Law provides limited protection for the environment during armed conflict. Articles 35(3) and 55 of Additional Protocol I prohibit widespread, long-term, and severe environmental damage.[891] However, these provisions are narrowly framed and rarely invoked in practice.

B. International Environmental Law

Environmental treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea establish important obligations. However, their enforcement mechanisms are weak, particularly in conflict situations.[892]

C. Climate Change Regime

The Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change focuses on mitigation and adaptation but does not address security implications.[893] This map presents a combined view on climate hazard exposure, conflict hazard exposure and vulnerability.



Climate-Conflict-Vulnerability Index: Hazard Exposure and Vulnerability[894]

VI. Judicial Developments and Case Law

Judicial decisions have played a significant role in shaping environmental governance:

[887] Food and Agriculture Organization, The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (2017).
[888] World Bank, Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration (2018).
[889] Colin P. Kelley et al., Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent, 112 Proc. Nat'l Acad. Sci. 3241 (2015).
[890] United Nations Environment Programme, Livelihood Security: Climate Change, Migration and Conflict in the Sahel (2011).
[891] Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 (Protocol I), arts. 35(3), 55, June 8, 1977, 1125 U.N.T.S. 3.
[892] Convention on Biological Diversity, June 5, 1992, 1760 U.N.T.S. 79; United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Dec. 10, 1982, 1833 U.N.T.S. 3.
[893] Paris Agreement, Dec. 12, 2015, T.I.A.S. No. 16-1104; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, May 9, 1992, 1771 U.N.T.S. 107.
[894] Climate-Conflict-Vulnerability Index: Hazard Exposure and Vulnerability: https://climate-conflict.org/www/data-pages/hazards.

- In *Trail Smelter Arbitration*, the tribunal established the principle that states must prevent transboundary environmental harm.[895]
- In *Pulp Mills Case*, the International Court of Justice emphasized environmental impact assessment as a customary obligation.[896]
- In *Advisory Opinion on Nuclear Weapons*, the Court recognized environmental considerations as integral to the application of humanitarian law.[897]
- In India, *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India* established the precautionary principle and sustainable development as part of domestic law.[898]

These cases collectively demonstrate the evolution of environmental norms relevant to conflict situations.

VII. Climate Displacement, Human Rights Law, and Emerging Conflict Dynamics

One of the most profound yet underdeveloped dimensions of the climate–conflict nexus is the phenomenon of climate-induced displacement and its interaction with international human rights law. The existing international legal framework, particularly the 1951 Refugee Convention, remains ill-equipped to address displacement caused by environmental factors, as it confines protection to persecution-based grounds.[899] This doctrinal limitation has resulted in a significant protection gap, leaving millions of climate-affected individuals outside the ambit of formal refugee protection.[900]

A pivotal development in this context is the decision in *Teitiota v. New Zealand*, wherein the United Nations Human Rights Committee acknowledged that environmental degradation and climate change may, in extreme circumstances, give rise to non-refoulement obligations under international human rights law.[901] Although the petitioner's claim was ultimately unsuccessful, the Committee's reasoning marked a significant normative shift by recognizing that climate-induced harm can threaten the right to life under Article 6 of the ICCPR.[902]

This jurisprudential evolution indicates a gradual expansion of human rights law to accommodate environmental realities. It also underscores the need to reconceptualize displacement not merely as a humanitarian issue but as a legal and security concern.[903] In conflict-prone regions, climate-induced migration often exacerbates existing socio-political tensions, thereby acting as a catalyst for violence.

Closely linked to this phenomenon is the growing role of non-state actors in climate-affected conflict zones. Environmental degradation and resource scarcity frequently create governance vacuums that are exploited by insurgent groups, militias, and other non-state entities. In regions such as the Lake Chad Basin, declining water levels and loss of livelihoods have contributed to the rise of extremist groups, which capitalize on local grievances and resource competition.[904] These actors often assume de facto control over natural resources, further complicating conflict dynamics and undermining state authority.

The increasing prominence of non-state actors highlights a fundamental limitation of international law, which remains predominantly state-centric. Existing legal frameworks struggle to regulate the conduct of such actors, particularly in relation to environmental harm

[895] *Trail Smelter Arbitration,* 3 R.I.A.A. 1905 (1941).
[896] *Pulp Mills Case,* 2010 I.C.J. 14.
[897] Advisory Opinion on Nuclear Weapons, 1996 I.C.J. 226.
[898] *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India,* (1996) 5 S.C.C. 647 (India).
[899] 1951 Refugee Convention, art. 1A (2), July 28, 1951, 189 U.N.T.S. 137.
[900] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Climate Change and Disaster Displacement* (2020).
[901] *Teitiota v. New Zealand*, Commc'n No. 2728/2016, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/127/D/2728/2016 (2020).
[902] United Nations Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 (2018).
[903] World Bank, *Groundswell Report* (2018).
[904] United Nations Development Programme, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (2017).

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and resource exploitation.[905] This gap necessitates the development of more inclusive and adaptive legal mechanisms capable of addressing the realities of modern conflict.

VIII. Institutional Responses, Environmental Peacebuilding, and Global Governance

The international community has responded to the climate–conflict nexus through a range of institutional mechanisms, though these efforts remain fragmented and insufficiently coordinated. Organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Development Programme play a central role in addressing environmental degradation and promoting sustainable development in conflict-affected regions.[906]

The United Nations Environment Programme has been instrumental in conducting post-conflict environmental assessments, documenting the long-term ecological impacts of warfare, and recommending strategies for environmental restoration.[907] Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme has advanced the concept of environmental peacebuilding, which emphasizes the role of sustainable resource management in conflict prevention and recovery.[908]

Environmental peacebuilding represents a paradigm shift in conflict resolution, recognizing that shared environmental challenges can serve as a basis for cooperation rather than conflict. Joint management of transboundary resources—such as water basins, forests, and fisheries—can foster trust, reduce tensions, and create opportunities for dialogue among conflicting parties.[909] By addressing the root causes of conflict, environmental peacebuilding contributes to long-term stability and resilience. However, despite these promising developments, institutional responses remain hindered by fragmentation, overlapping mandates, and limited enforcement capacity. The lack of coordination between environmental, humanitarian, and security institutions results in inefficiencies and missed opportunities for integrated action.[910]

IX. International Criminal Law, Ecocide Debate, and Accountability

Accountability for environmental harm in conflict situations remains one of the most underdeveloped areas of international law. The International Criminal Court provides a limited framework for addressing environmental destruction through Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute, which criminalizes acts causing widespread, long-term, and severe damage to the natural environment.[911] However, the high threshold for establishing such crimes significantly restricts the practical applicability of this provision.

The limitations of existing frameworks have prompted growing calls for the recognition of "ecocide" as an independent international crime.[912] The proposed concept seeks to criminalize severe environmental destruction irrespective of its direct nexus with armed conflict. This debate reflects a broader shift toward recognizing environmental protection as integral to international peace and security.

X. Comparative Insights: Indian Environmental Jurisprudence

Domestic legal systems provide valuable insights into environmental governance. In India, judicial interpretation has significantly expanded environmental rights. In *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court established the doctrine of absolute liability, holding hazardous industries strictly liable for environmental harm.[913] Similarly, in *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar*, the Court recognized the right to a

[905] International Committee of the Red Cross, *Environment and Armed Conflict* (2020).
[906] United Nations Environment Programme; United Nations Development Programme Reports.
[907] UNEP, *Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment* (2009).
[908] UNDP, *Environmental Governance for Peacebuilding* (2019).
[909] Ken Conca, *Governing Water* (2006).
[910] United Nations on climate-security coordination.
[911] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 8(2)(b)(iv), July 17, 1998.
[912] Philippe Sands, *Principles of International Environmental Law* (2018).
[913] *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India,* (1987) 1 SCC 395.

pollution-free environment as part of the right to life under Article 21.[914]

Despite evolving jurisprudence, the international legal framework remains fragmented. The lack of integration between environmental law, humanitarian law, and human rights law undermines effective governance.[915] The predominance of soft law mechanisms further weakens enforceability, while the absence of liability frameworks limits accountability. Scholars such as Jutta Brunnee emphasize that effective legal systems require both normative coherence and institutional compliance mechanisms.[916]

There is an urgent need for a paradigm shift toward an integrated legal framework that bridges environmental protection and conflict governance. Such a framework must incorporate climate security considerations into international law and emphasize prevention, accountability, and justice.[917] Key elements include recognition of climate displacement, strengthening preventive mechanisms, developing binding obligations, integrating environmental peacebuilding, and promoting climate justice.[918]

XI. Conclusion

Climate change represents a transformative challenge to international law and global security. As a threat multiplier, it exacerbates vulnerabilities and contributes to conflict dynamics. Existing legal frameworks, while foundational, remain inadequate to address the complex interplay between climate change and armed conflict.

A comprehensive legal response requires integration across disciplines, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and a commitment to climate justice. Only through such reforms can the international community effectively address the challenges posed by climate-induced conflicts and ensure sustainable peace.

[914] *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar*, (1991) 1 SCC 598.
[915] Daniel Bodansky, *The Art and Craft of International Environmental Law* (2010).
[916] Jutta Brunnee, *Interactional International Law* (2010).
[917] United Nations Security Council, Climate Security Debates.
[918] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Assessment Reports.