Climate Refugees

What is the issue?

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Tuvalu, a small island nation in the South Pacific and home to about 10,000 people, is likely to be under water in less than 70 years.

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How are the island nations getting affected?

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- Due to the rising sea level caused by global warming, low-lying island nations such as Kiribati, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Vanuatu, Micronesia and Nauru are destined to suffer the same fate.
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- The **52 low-lying vulnerable island nations sustain 62 million people** and emit less than 1% of global greenhouse gases (GHGs), yet are among the first victims of climate disruption.
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- High sea levels have already resulted in displacement of people in several small island nations.
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- **More people are likely to migrate due to slow-onset processes** of environmental degradation such as inundation, desertification, soil erosion and changing coastlines than sudden-onset events like storms and cyclones.
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- The total population in the South Sea region is projected to reach in excess of 18 million by mid-century, which could result in between 660000 and 1,750,000 people migrating to other regions of the world.
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- A sea level rise of 0.5 to 2 m could leave between 1.2 and 2.2 million people displaced from the Caribbean Sea and the Indian and Pacific Oceans.
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- This will set off domestic as well as **cross-border migration.**
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How are the developed countries responding?

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- The international community does not yet realise its responsibility to enable such migration.
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- For example, on request from Tuvalu’s Prime Minister, New Zealand agreed to allow a meagre 75 Tuvaluans to relocate annually to their country, a migration that should stretch over 140 years.
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- Australia refused to make any offers when approached similarly.
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- The capital cost of sea level rise in the Caribbean Community countries alone is estimated at $187 billion by 2080.
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- **The Pacific Possible programme of the World Bank** predicts the cost of adaptation to be $18,500 per person for Marshall Islands and $11,000 for Solomon Islands over a period of 30 years from 2012.
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- Legal analysts are considering the possibility of an **international compensation commission** which could address the burden of adaptation expenses on the island nations through an international fund.
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What are the possible remedies?

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- With the policies in force today, GHG emissions are projected to grow by 50% by 2050.
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- Any amount of decrease in GHG emissions cannot save the islands from sinking, but a **significant decrease in emissions could delay** the island nations from becoming uninhabitable, thereby postponing the burden of accommodating mass migration.
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- While these are broad remedies that the sinking island nations immediately require, they are hardly exhaustive.
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- There is a need for a wide range of varied remedies, mostly adaptive, such as coastal protection, population consolidation, rainwater harvesting and

storage, alternative methods of growing fruits and vegetables, human resource development and research and observation.
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What could be done?

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- The only practical way to attain these remedies seems to be to **reinvigorate political pressure and negotiate globally** to arrive at a forum that could deal with the issue.
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- The forum must enable negotiations regarding the **legal status of migrants** and develop adaptive strategies in the destination country to guarantee and to protect dignity and cultural identity of the displaced in the destination country.
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- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) obligates countries to provide finance to resist global warming.
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- By extending such existing obligations the forum could ensure compensation to the island nations in the form of contributions from party countries by managing a fund created in this regard.
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- Lastly, the forum would require a **tribunal to assess the case** presented by each island nation and to decide whether help from the international community is required.
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- The tribunal could then invoke appropriate measures such as multilateral negotiations or directions that enable migration, compensation and other remedies that could save the people of the sinking small island nations.
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Source: The Hindu

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