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DANGER BY DESIGN

**How Climate Injustice Harms Displaced
People at the U.S.-Mexico Border**

IRAP



LAS AMERICAS
IMMIGRANT ADVOCACY CENTER

ABOUT IRAP

The International Refugee Assistance Project (“IRAP”) is a global legal aid and advocacy organization working to create a world where refugees and all people seeking safety are empowered to claim their right to freedom of movement and a path to lasting refuge.

This report compiles information that IRAP gathered in interviews with asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border.

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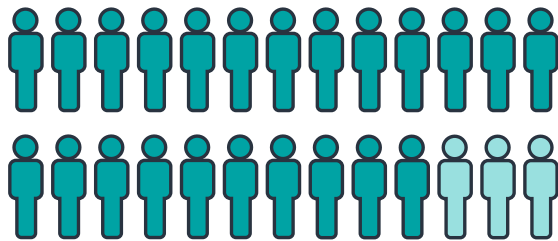
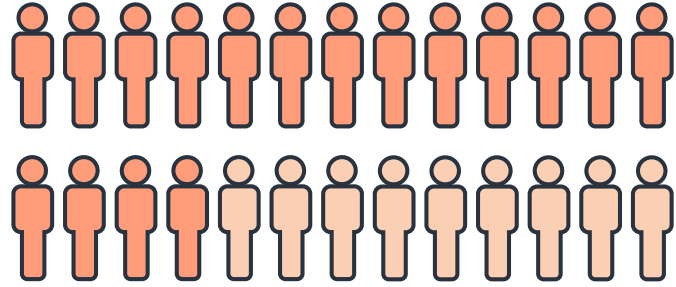
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change is a significant driver of displacement, yet current legal frameworks fail to protect people fleeing climate-related disasters and other harms caused by environmental degradation.

Restrictive immigration policies worsen this crisis by pushing vulnerable populations into perilous migration routes, where climate-exacerbated hazards pose even greater risks to their safety and survival. This report examines climate-related drivers of displacement and the environmental dangers people seeking protection face en route to the United States. Through firsthand accounts collected in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas in January 2025, this report demonstrates that environmental disasters both contribute to initial displacement and exacerbate vulnerabilities along migration routes.

Among the asylum seekers we interviewed, **65%** (17 out of 26) **pointed to climate harm as a factor influencing their decision to leave their country of origin.**



Furthermore, an overwhelming **88% of interviewees** (23 out of 26) reported experiencing **extreme weather** during transit to the U.S.-Mexico border, including extreme heat, cold, flooding, and storms—conditions that exacerbate the severe dangers already inherent to irregular migration.

These qualitative findings, highlighted through case studies below, complement and deepen IRAP's earlier quantitative research. Our **Climate Mobility Data Project** has documented climate-related harms affecting thousands of migrants and asylum seekers across the Americas.¹

Despite evidence of the increasing role climate change plays in driving displacement, current legal frameworks offer limited protection. There is no international legal framework or U.S. law designed specifically to protect climate-displaced people.² Though some may qualify for asylum, which protects people fleeing persecution on account of limited protected grounds, recent policies significantly limit asylum access. The Biden administration had limited asylum access to those with appointments scheduled through Customs and Border Protection (CBP)'s mobile application, CBP One. All of our interviewees were either awaiting a CBP One appointment or had recently entered through such an appointment. Since President Trump's inauguration, the discontinuation of CBP One for this purpose and the categorical suspension on entry has precluded most people from seeking asylum and thus reaching safety at all.³

In addition to the absence of clear immigration relief for climate-impacted people, U.S. externalization policies restricting asylum access and freedom of movement across the region further drive people into more dangerous routes such as through deserts, jungles, and waterways, where climate change makes already perilous journeys even more deadly.⁴ These

immigration policies, combined with the rolling back of measures meant to limit greenhouse gas emissions and control climate change, contribute to an ongoing human rights crisis: as climate change worsens the conditions driving displacement, restrictive immigration policies block displaced people from protection and force people on the move into increasingly dangerous migration routes where climate-related hazards make journeys even more life-threatening.

In the context of the recent and expected policies of the Trump administration, IRAP's interviews underscore the imperative of restoring asylum access for all, affording legal protection to people displaced for climate-related reasons, and mitigating environment-related harms to people in transit. The greatest responsibility for addressing the harms of climate change rests with the United States and other historically high-emitting countries. **But even in the absence of U.S. leadership, the international community must advance global policy solutions that address the compounding challenges of mass displacement and climate disasters.**

[Skip to Case Studies](#)

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of climate change and human mobility has become a pressing humanitarian challenge. This report examines how climate change contributes both to the drivers of displacement and to the dangers people face along migration journeys, drawing on firsthand accounts collected at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The findings of this report are based on 26 interviews with displaced individuals from 12 countries that IRAP conducted in January 2025 in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas with support from Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center. The narratives highlight how climate change and environmental degradation are significantly impacting displaced people across the Americas. **The majority of interviewees identified environmental disasters and their aftermath as contributing factors in their decision to flee**, while many also described how extreme weather conditions such as heat, flooding, and storms intensified the dangers they faced along their migration journeys.

DATA RECAP

Our qualitative findings build on our quantitative research through the Climate Mobility Data Project, a collaboration among legal services and advocacy organizations collecting data on how climate change impacts the experiences of individuals seeking United States immigration relief. The project has generated extensive data: of more than 3,600 asylum seekers and migrants who responded to the survey as of fall 2024 (when we published the initial report on the findings), 43% of respondents reported experiencing a climate-related disaster in their country of origin, including heavy rains (46%), extreme heat (40%), hurricanes (39%), and flooding (38%), with 64% experiencing more than one disaster. Additionally, 43.1% encountered environmental challenges during transit, most commonly extreme heat (29%), extreme cold (27%), and heavy rains (15%), and over 22% experienced both country-of-origin and transit-related climate impacts.⁵

While the Climate Mobility Data Project has generated valuable data on climate-related impacts affecting thousands of migrants and displaced people, the targeted interviews of this report establish more direct causal links between climate-related disasters and individual decisions to flee home. Because interviewees were not selected based on climate-related experiences, the widespread identification of climate and environmental factors as key reasons for fleeing highlights the growing urgency of recognizing climate change as a root cause of displacement.

Together, these findings point to the global need for both immediate protection measures for climate-displaced people and broader reforms to address the environmental and policy conditions that are increasingly forcing people to flee and endangering their search for safety.

FINDINGS FROM CLIMATE DATA REPORT

43% of respondents reported experiencing a climate-related disaster in their country of origin, including:



heavy rains

46%



extreme heat

40%



hurricanes

39%



flooding

38%

43.1% encountered environmental challenges during transit, most commonly:



extreme heat

29%



extreme cold

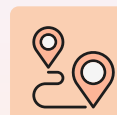
27%



heavy rains

15%

Over 22% experienced both country-of-origin and transit-related climate impacts



METHODOLOGY

This report draws from 26 in-depth interviews IRAP conducted in early January 2025 at migrant shelters in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico and El Paso, Texas. Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center staff supported the implementation of the survey and accompanied IRAP during visits to shelters.

The research team consisted of two IRAP attorneys and four law students who interviewed displaced people at shelters about their experiences with climate impacts and environmental disasters, both in their countries of origin and during their journeys to the U.S.-Mexico border. Participants were not selected based on climate-related experiences; they simply volunteered to participate in interviews about their broader displacement and migration experiences.

Half (13) of the interviewees were Venezuelan. Others were Mexican (four), Honduran (four), Salvadoran (two), and one each was Ecuadorian, Equatorial Guinean, and Colombian. Most interviewees were waiting in Ciudad Juárez for appointments through the now-discontinued CBP One application to enter the United States, while some interviews were conducted with people who had recently arrived in El Paso after successfully entering through a CBP One appointment. All interviewees intended to seek U.S. asylum.

Before each interview, participants were informed of the research purpose and provided consent for their stories to be used anonymously in this report. The interviews were conducted during a period of significant uncertainty in the weeks before President Trump's inauguration. This imminent expected change in U.S. policies contributed to the precarious circumstances of IRAP's interviewees awaiting the opportunity to seek refuge in the United States.

Climate Change Impacts Contribute to Displacement

Climate change impacts are increasingly forcing people to flee their homes. Since 2008, disasters have consistently displaced more people than violence and armed conflict, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center.⁶ In 2023, the Center recorded 26.4 million instances of internal displacement due to disasters, and 20.5 million displacements due to conflict and violence.⁷ While less data exists on cross-border climate-related displacement, IRAP's research provides evidence that environmental disasters and other climate change impacts are increasingly contributing to cross-border displacement as well.⁸

Indeed, in interviews IRAP conducted in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, many asylum seekers described how climate change intensified the challenges they faced in their countries of origin and contributed to their decisions to flee. While not always the primary reason for leaving, environmental disasters often exacerbated other vulnerabilities that contributed to displacement. While the interviews did not systematically measure vulnerability across demographic groups, many narratives revealed the compounded and intersectional risks faced by women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and Indigenous communities. The stories that follow illustrate how climate change contributes to cross-border displacement. All names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy and safety of the interviewees.



Valentina (they/them) is a 21-year-old non-binary Indigenous person of the Lacandon Maya people from Chiapas, Mexico. They grew up working alongside their family in the coffee and corn fields of their remote community in the Lacandon Jungle. Their community has endured a series of devastating environmental disasters over the years. A hurricane triggered massive landslides that destroyed numerous homes and claimed many lives in their region. The community also experienced frequent flooding as rivers regularly overflowed during heavy storms, inundating the city center. Later, a catastrophic earthquake struck,⁹ destroying homes and causing widespread injuries, including Valentina's mother who suffered a neck injury when their ceiling collapsed.

These disasters had profound impacts on community life. Landslides disrupted their ability to grow, harvest, and sell food. The once-fertile farmland degraded significantly, causing crop failures and food shortages, though water remained accessible due to nearby rivers in the jungle. Educational and healthcare services were difficult to access, with the nearest facilities being five hours away by car.

During the environmental disasters, government assistance was minimal or completely absent. Officials would occasionally conduct rescue missions but provided no resources for rebuilding. As conditions worsened, Valentina became involved in grassroots activism among the Lacandon Maya people, advocating for government assistance to protect Chiapas from ecological damage. Instead of support, they received direct threats from government officials warning them not to protest as it would "affect tourism" and that "things will go badly for you" if they continued their advocacy.

The environmental crises were compounded by escalating violence. Valentina first fled to Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas, seeking safety after receiving threats for their activism. However, they found the city extremely dangerous, especially for LGBTQ+ people, who were being openly targeted, sometimes in broad daylight. Valentina recalled a march for the rights of LGBTQ+ people in 2018 where multiple demonstrators were murdered. Facing these converging threats, Valentina decided to flee Mexico in 2024.



Ada, a 34-year-old woman from the central region of Honduras, fled with her husband and two young children after repeated environmental disasters and escalating threats from organized crime made it impossible to remain in her community. Her area was regularly hit by hurricanes and intense rainfall, which caused frequent flooding of streets and buildings. Although her home was located at a higher elevation and was spared from direct flooding, nearby houses were destroyed, and landslides in surrounding communities displaced many. The floods contaminated water sources with trash and debris, and essential services such as schools and hospitals often shut down during heavy rains.

Ada owned a small convenience store, which had supported her family until gang extortion made it unsustainable. In 2023, gang members began demanding monthly payments. At first, Ada was able to comply, but the fees steadily increased and became unaffordable. Even when extreme weather impacted people's incomes, the gang still expected payment. **"When it rains, it's hard to work, but they still come to take money from people,"** she said. When Ada's family could no longer pay, gang members came to their home armed with guns and later tried to recruit their son as an informant. With no protection from authorities, worsening gang activity, and repeated environmental disasters that made it increasingly difficult to survive, Ada and her family made the difficult decision to leave Honduras.



Marta, a 28-year-old Indigenous Wayuu woman, was driven from Venezuela primarily by the devastating effects of climate change on her traditional livelihood. As a cattle farmer, she witnessed firsthand how warming temperatures and increasingly extreme weather patterns made her way of life unsustainable.

In recent years, summers in her region became extraordinarily hot, bringing prolonged dry seasons that severely impacted both crops and livestock. **"The summer is very dry, so the animals suffer greatly,"** she explained, noting that her cattle had developed health problems like diarrhea from the harsh conditions. Without resources to address these issues, the situation became dire: **"The animals lack medicine and food, which we cannot buy."**

The changing climate created a cascade of hardships. Drought conditions drastically reduced available vegetation for grazing and limited water supplies, causing animal health to decline significantly. As the animals became sick, they produced less cheese and other products, simultaneously reducing her family's income and food supply. For Marta's community, which relied entirely on their land and animals for sustenance, this created an existential threat.

"Sometimes when it does not rain, we do not have access to food," she said. Despite the severity of these challenges, her community received no government assistance.

In 2024, these factors led Marta to leave Venezuela with her partner and young son, hoping to reach the United States to earn money to send back and improve her community's lands and livestock operations.

The experiences of Valentina, Ada, and Marta show how climate change contributes to displacement by compounding preexisting inequalities and exposing individuals to targeted violence, discrimination, and food insecurity. In many cases, these harms intersect with traditional protected grounds under U.S. asylum law. Valentina, an Indigenous, non-binary climate activist in Mexico, faced direct threats from government officials for protesting environmental destruction and defending Indigenous land, and may have a viable asylum claim based on persecution on account of her ethnicity and/or political opinion. Ada, whose community in Honduras faced repeated flooding and landslides, was targeted by gangs when her family could no longer afford rising extortion fees amidst inadequate government protection; if she could show that the targeting was tied to a protected ground, her case may also be viable. Others, like Marta—a Wayuu farmer displaced by drought—may not fit neatly into current legal pathway requirements in the United States, but she nonetheless suffered profound harm caused by environmental factors, highlighting the protection gap for those displaced by climate-related events alone.

Other interviewees reported similar environmental challenges in their countries of origin. **Seventeen of 26 interviewees reported that climate-related disruptions—such as floods, droughts, and extreme heat—contributed to their displacement, often by intensifying other risks like poverty, hunger, or violence.** Most reported experiencing extreme weather events before fleeing, with 13 describing

intense rain and flooding, and seven citing extreme heat or drought. Venezuelans made up the largest share of interviewees, but their experiences varied based on where they had lived: while some reported intense rainfall, flooding, drought, or extreme heat, others noted they had not experienced major environmental impacts prior to leaving. Interviewees from Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico primarily described heavy rains, hurricanes, and flooding, while those from Ecuador and Colombia experienced both drought and extreme rainfall. These weather patterns are consistent with broader regional climate shifts documented in the World Meteorological Organization's State of the Climate in Latin America and the Caribbean 2023 report, which confirmed 2023 as the hottest year on record for the region and identified more frequent extreme heat, erratic rainfall, and intensifying droughts and storms due to climate change.¹⁰

Interviewees further reported that climate change impacts undermined food security and destroyed livelihoods. **A 30-year-old man from Venezuela explained that rising temperatures prevented him from working for months, reducing his income. A 44-year-old produce vendor from Honduras lost his livelihood after heavy rains destroyed essential crops. A 25-year-old woman from El Salvador reported that repeated floods destroyed crops, raised food prices, and closed schools. A 28-year-old man from El Salvador noted flooding raised egg prices from \$3.25 to \$5 per carton, while irregular rainfall disrupted planting cycles, threatening local food production.**

People with disabilities or critical health conditions face heightened vulnerability to climate-related harms, which often disrupt access to essential care and services. **One woman in Venezuela, living with untreated tumors, was unable to obtain a safe biopsy in part due to climate-related health system disruptions. A man from Honduras said his family fled in part because his wife's heart condition worsened after repeated hurricanes and the breakdown of local hospitals.** In these settings, climate disasters magnify the risks already faced by people with disabilities or those with critical health conditions.

These findings on climate impacts contributing to loss of livelihoods and adverse health impacts are consistent with the broader findings from IRAP's Climate Mobility Data Project. Among the 486 respondents who reported specific disaster impacts, 57% said their homes were severely damaged or destroyed. Twenty-nine percent faced income loss or were unable to sustain their livelihoods, while 18% reported degraded farmland and crop failure. Nearly half (45%) noted that their workplace was inaccessible or closed due to climate impacts. Additionally, 21% reported illness or injury linked to climate events, with 27% driven into extreme poverty and 40% reporting a lack of sufficient food and water.¹¹

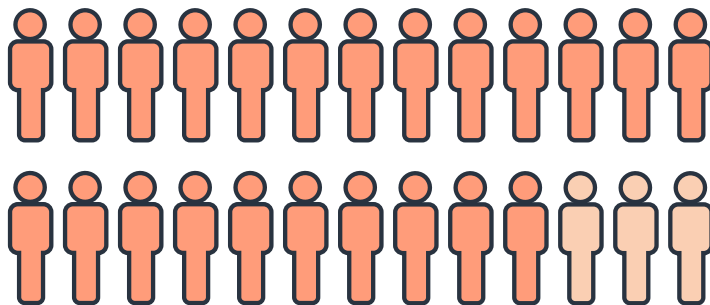
Climate-related disasters also increased vulnerability to violence and criminal exploitation among those IRAP interviewed for this report. Ten interviewees experienced gang violence, including extortion, threats, and forced recruitment—

often in the wake of climate-related disasters. Some were directly targeted after gangs killed or harmed their family members, while others described how gangs exploited post-disaster instability to strengthen their control. **A 32-year-old man from Ecuador described how wildfires near his workplace halted business for two weeks, cutting off his income entirely, while gangs maintained control over nearby mines. Similarly, a 45-year-old woman from Colombia explained that after repeated floods wiped out farmland and damaged her home, gangs controlled access to essential supplies, collected extortion fees, and recruited vulnerable community members, including children. In addition, a 21-year-old man from Equatorial Guinea explained how criminal groups used the chaos following disasters to increase extortion and recruit new members, and a 44-year-old Honduran man noted that during hurricane evacuations, gangs systematically looted abandoned homes.**

State responses were often inadequate or hostile—seven interviewees reported direct threats or violence from government officials, particularly after requesting aid or criticizing disaster responses, as in Valentina's case. Other interviewees described insufficient government support in the wake of disasters. **A 37-year-old Venezuelan man recounted how after flooding, government assistance was limited to temporary shelters where some families remained for years, while a 25-year-old Salvadoran woman noted that even after years of persistent flooding, government help was limited to short-term shelters with no financial support to repair homes or recover from crop loss.**

Climate Impacts Amplify Journey Dangers

Climate change is intensifying the already perilous journey that asylum seekers face when traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border. U.S. policies restricting freedom of movement across borders force people seeking protection into remote routes across dangerous terrain. **An overwhelming 88% of interviewees (23 out of 26) reported experiencing extreme weather during transit,¹² including severe heat, cold, flooding, and treacherous terrain.** These environmental hazards not only pose immediate threats to people's physical safety but also exacerbate other dangers they encounter along the way.





Valentina, the non-binary Indigenous person from southern Mexico, embarked on a grueling seven-month journey to the U.S.-Mexico border in 2024. They traveled alone before joining a group of seven people, including three from their own community and others they met along the way.

In Veracruz, Mexico, they encountered a devastating storm that caused the river to overflow. Their phone and clothes were destroyed by water. During the storm, Valentina fractured their arm while trying to rescue a girl trapped in rising floodwaters—a rescue attempt that, tragically, was not successful. At the same time, a concrete object collapsed onto the group, resulting in head injuries for some and a dislocated shoulder for one member.

Valentina then crossed a desert without water for two days, at one point giving their bottled water to a family with a dehydrated baby. Valentina suffered from sinusitis but was unable to receive treatment until reaching Ciudad Juárez. They slept outside or in tents in Veracruz and Ciudad de México, occasionally finding people who offered them cots in their homes.

To survive the journey, Valentina earned money by buying and selling candy. However, they were extorted four times during their travels. The most harrowing experience came in Ciudad Juárez, where they and three others from their community were captured and held captive for two months. Valentina was beaten until their family paid a \$2,000 ransom. This traumatic experience left Valentina afraid to leave the Ciudad Juárez shelter where IRAP interviewed them.



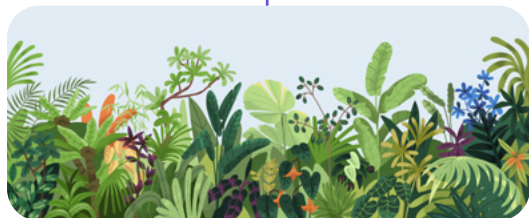
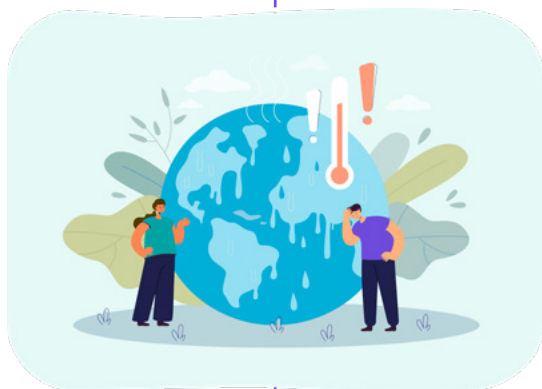
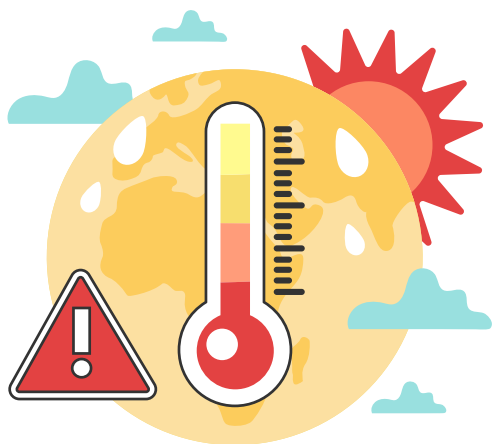
Faced with recurring environmental disasters and escalating gang extortion in Honduras, **Ada** embarked on a grueling ten-month journey with her husband and two young children (ages 3 and 10) toward the United States.

The extreme heat in southern Mexico took a severe physical toll on the entire family—they lost significant weight, experienced hair loss, and suffered from dehydration. Contaminated water made the family sick, and Ada's mother endured persistent headaches from the heat.

Their shelter conditions offered minimal protection from environmental extremes, with dangerous temperature fluctuations and periods where they had no choice but to sleep outside.

As they traversed mountainous terrain, rivers, and deserts on foot, heavy rains created treacherous conditions and flooding.

Without the ability to move safely through Mexico, the family also faced severe violence: they were kidnapped and held in cages upon entering Mexico until they paid a ransom, Ada suffered sexual assault in front of her 3-year-old child, and they were robbed on the street with no help from authorities.



Leaving Venezuela in 2024, **Marta's** three-day trek through the Darién jungle with her partner and five-year-old son was the most difficult part of their journey. "The heat was unbearable. It was so bad that we got little bumps on our skin, and my son had diarrhea and vomiting," Marta recalled.

"We ran out of food in the jungle. We spent three days there before finally making it to Panama, where we could finally taste real food again." They survived on "just a little water, canned tuna, and crackers. That was all we had. The little water we had ran out, and we had to drink water from the canal." Her young child became severely ill. "My son became dehydrated because of diarrhea and vomiting. The climate was too harsh for him."

Marta witnessed deeply traumatic scenes: "There were so many things we saw in the jungle—dead bodies everywhere. You don't even know if you're stepping on someone's head, an arm, or something else." She also observed how resource scarcity turned people against each other, noting one family that began fighting due to lack of water and food.

The environmental challenges continued as they progressed through their journey. "When we arrived in Mexico, the climate changed again, this time to extreme cold. Our lips became chapped, and my son's nose started bleeding from the cold. We suffered because of the drastic weather shift—from unbearable heat to freezing temperatures. The cold hit us hard."

The experiences of Ada, Valentina, and Marta illustrate how extreme environmental conditions during transit create multilayered challenges for people on the move who lack safe pathways to seek U.S. protection. Extreme weather compounded the dangers of their journeys, as did limited access to food, water, and medical care. Other asylum seekers IRAP interviewed similarly described facing extreme heat, heavy rains, health risks, and violence, with climate-related disasters further intensifying these hardships.

Among the individuals IRAP interviewed for this report, 14 cited harsh weather and 16 identified health challenges during their migration journeys in pursuit of safety. Seven interviewees experienced food insecurity, and 11 reported drinking contaminated water, leading to fever, diarrhea, and dehydration. Extreme heat was a common cause of illness and injury, with nine interviewees describing passing out, developing painful blisters, or suffering dehydration—especially while traveling through Mexico. **A 25-year-old woman from El Salvador described how pregnant women in her caravan fainted from heat exhaustion and others developed dangerously low blood pressure due to prolonged exposure to high temperatures and lack of food. Several interviewees, including a 30-year-old man from Venezuela and his elderly uncle, suffered from dehydration after days without**

reliable shelter or water. Interviewees reported that their children lost weight due to prolonged exposure to heat and poor water quality.

Twelve interviewees endured extreme cold, including spending nights exposed to freezing temperatures. At the time IRAP conducted interviews in early January 2025, temperatures were below freezing with sporadic snowfall in Ciudad Juárez, where some interviewees were staying in shelter conditions that did not adequately insulate them from the cold. Several interviewees remarked that cold temperatures in Ciudad Juárez had been challenging. These increasingly erratic and severe weather patterns—including extreme heatwaves and cold snaps—reflect broader shifts associated with climate change.¹³

Rain and flooding also created dangerous conditions: 11 interviewees noted that heavy rains made walking treacherous, flooded rivers, and destroyed important belongings like phones and identity documents. **A 37-year-old man from Venezuela spent three days in the Darién sleeping in makeshift shelters during relentless rains that left the terrain muddy and hazardous. A 45-year-old woman from Colombia faced extreme cold and illness after being soaked while riding atop train cars with her daughter.** Assistance remained scarce along the journey, forcing many to rely primarily on informal support from local communities.

These findings are consistent with IRAP's broader Climate Mobility Data Project. Among 417 respondents who identified specific environmental-related harms experienced in transit, 27% were unable to obtain food, water, or basic supplies and 24% reported an inability to access secure shelter—challenges often intensified by environmental conditions like heat, cold, and flooding.¹⁴

Extreme weather conditions often result in injuries and impairments along the route, some of which may lead to short-term or long-term disabilities. Health complications linked to extreme weather and lack of access to basic necessities were widespread during transit. Many interviewees reported worsening preexisting conditions without access to medical care. **A 38-year-old woman from Venezuela developed severe asthma complications from constant dampness and extreme weather in the jungle. She also lived with untreated tumors and experienced severe asthma attacks and chronic pain from prolonged exposure to cold, rain, and sleeping outdoors; she later suffered a seizure following excessive anesthesia during emergency dental surgery, from which she developed an infection.**

Several interviewees described injuries from exposure to harsh climates and physically demanding terrain, including blisters, sores, and hives after days of walking in harsh terrain. The

25-year-old woman from El Salvador sustained a severe toe injury from walking on hard, rocky terrain, with only ibuprofen to manage the pain. Others reported sinusitis or respiratory flare-ups from dust and rain. Similarly, for IRAP's Climate Mobility Data Project, 39% of survey respondents reported illness or injury due to environmental conditions, and 21% were unable to access medical care.¹⁵

These environmental challenges—many of them linked to climate change—also heightened the risk of abuse and exploitation. Many interviewees faced violence during transit, with 16 individuals recounting assaults against themselves or witnessing attacks on family members and fellow travelers. The intensification of extreme weather due to climate change further compounds the longstanding dangers faced by people forced to traverse remote, unprotected terrain in search of safety. Gangs, cartels, and even law enforcement officers exploited their vulnerability through extortion, robbery, and kidnappings. Sexual violence was prevalent, with three women experiencing assault or rape and two men witnessing attacks on family members. **Seven interviewees described encountering deceased travelers—some witnessed killings while others discovered decomposing bodies, particularly in the Darién Gap, including in rivers where desperate travelers sought drinking water.**



U.S. Policies Worsen Climate Impacts While Blocking Safe Passage

At the time of publication of this report, more than four months since IRAP interviewed them, Valentina, Marta, and likely other interviewees remain stranded in Ciudad Juárez amid profound uncertainty. Without access to the U.S. asylum process, IRAP's interviewees and all people seeking safety at the border face indefinite limbo: unable to enter the United States, yet unable to return to the life-threatening conditions they fled. "Now, after what happened on January 20, we are waiting to see what happens," Marta told IRAP in a voice message after the initial interview from the shelter where she and many others remain confined, fearing the violence and kidnapping threats outside. "We don't know what we will do next." She and the other families remain trapped, with no path forward and no safe way back, waiting for policy changes that may never come.

Recent—and longstanding—U.S. immigration policies further endanger climate-displaced people by blocking access to asylum as well as increasing the dangers they face while in transit. Under the Biden administration, restrictive asylum measures—such as requiring limitedly available appointments through the CBP One mobile application—left many asylum seekers, including those who had suffered climate impacts, stranded in dangerous border cities in Mexico, often without access to shelter, sanitation, or medical care.¹⁶ All of IRAP’s interviewees were either awaiting a CBP One appointment or had recently entered the United States through this system. Since President Trump’s inauguration, however, the federal government has eliminated CBP One as a pathway to asylum altogether, threatening the legal status of individuals who previously entered through the program, and imposing a categorical suspension on entry that has effectively shut down access to asylum at the southern border.¹⁷

The Trump administration has implemented a barrage of other measures aimed at obstructing access to the border and asylum, including terminating parole programs that had allowed nationals of certain countries to safely enter the United States to seek protection,¹⁸ and pressuring other governments to intensify migration enforcement efforts.¹⁹ Among these, the proposed reinstatement of the

“Migrant Protection Protocols” (Remain in Mexico) program,²⁰ though not yet widely implemented, threatens to again trap asylum seekers in unsafe border regions—conditions that, during the program’s previous iteration, forced thousands to live in informal tent encampments in border cities, where exposure to extreme heat, flooding, and other climate-exacerbated hazards further strained already dangerous and precarious living conditions.²¹

Concurrent with migration restrictions, the United States has abandoned its climate leadership role by dismantling key environmental protections. This includes withdrawing from the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,²² rolling back U.S. greenhouse gas emissions standards and pollution restrictions,²³ and slashing United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding for critical climate resilience programs abroad.²⁴ These policy reversals will likely accelerate global climate change in the coming decades and drive further displacement. **By failing to address climate change while simultaneously restricting migration pathways, the United States perpetuates a human rights crisis: its actions will force more people to flee their countries of origin over time, while systematically closing off routes to safety for those displaced by climate change impacts.**



Recommendations for Advocates and Civil Society Actors

Access to asylum and other protection pathways must be restored for all people seeking safety at the U.S.-Mexico border. As IRAP's research shows, some individuals displaced by climate impacts likely have viable asylum claims. For those outside the scope of refugee protection frameworks, other legal pathways should be established and expanded. While greenhouse gas emissions reduction remains essential to address root causes of displacement, immediate measures are necessary to safeguard those already displaced, including those harmed by climate-related conditions during transit.

Civil society actors—including legal advocates, researchers, organizers, and frontline service providers—play a critical role in addressing the intersecting harms of climate-related displacement. They are well positioned to document lived experiences, elevate overlooked narratives, build the evidence base for policy change, and hold governments accountable to their legal and moral obligations. In the absence of robust state protections, advocates can mobilize support, shape public understanding, and advance structural reforms that uphold international legal protections²⁵ and center the voices and leadership of climate-displaced individuals, like those IRAP interviewed. The following recommendations are directed toward civil society actors and advocates across the United States and the region working to expand protections for climate-displaced people.²⁶

Recommendations

Document Climate-Related Displacement and Harm

- Identify and document climate-related harms experienced by displaced people and migrants. IRAP has developed standardized survey questions to support this work.²⁷
- Document unique vulnerabilities of climate-displaced people, particularly indigenous communities and environmental defenders, and publicize case examples that demonstrate how climate impacts intersect with persecution based on protected grounds for asylum and refugee protection.
- Support monitoring networks to document climate-related and other abuses experienced by migrants and displaced people throughout migration routes.

Improve Legal Protections for Climate-Displaced People

- Bring legal challenges against policies that block asylum access for climate-displaced people who also face persecution.
- Provide legal representation for climate-displaced asylum seekers—including land defenders, climate activists, individuals expressing climate-related political opinions, and those

with additional vulnerabilities, including people with disabilities who face heightened risks due to state neglect or discrimination—particularly in cases where climate impacts intersect with government persecution or state inaction.

- Advocate for expanding climate-specific visas and other humanitarian pathways for cross-border displacement.²⁸
- Support efforts to strengthen the application of broader refugee definitions like the Cartagena Declaration to climate-displaced people.

Advance Climate Justice Initiatives to Prevent Climate-Related Displacement and Harm

- Create strategic communication campaigns connecting climate justice with the rights of migrants and displaced people, highlighting the voices and stories of climate-displaced people, in particular those experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination and persecution due to climate activism, Indigeneity, age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other statuses.
- Advocate for climate justice reparations frameworks that recognize the outsized responsibility of the United States and other major emitters in creating conditions that force people to flee.

- Advocate for loss and damage funds that would directly support climate-vulnerable communities in the Americas affected by disasters, including funding for disability-inclusive preparedness, evacuation, and recovery efforts.
- Champion Indigenous land sovereignty as a climate adaptation strategy that prevents displacement.

Challenge Harmful Border Policies That Increase Climate-Related Danger

- Advocate for the rescinding of policies that externalize border enforcement to other countries, which force climate-displaced people into dangerous transit routes.
- Advocate for restoring asylum access at the U.S.-Mexico border and throughout the region to enable people fleeing climate-related persecution to seek asylum.
- Pursue litigation to hold the governments accountable for rights violations resulting from externalization arrangements and document cases of climate-related harms to migrants and displace people arising from these policies, in particular those who are at highest risk, including people with disabilities.

Promote Humanitarian Protections and Services Along Transit Routes

- Campaign to redirect resources from border militarization to humanitarian services, including to address climate-related needs during transit.
- Support local organizations providing access to safe shelter, clean water, food, and medical care for migrants and asylum seekers along transit journeys.
- Support organizations providing trauma-informed services for survivors of climate disasters, extreme heat exposure, and violence during migration.

CONCLUSION

IRAP's interviews with asylum seekers in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso reveal that climate change is a significant factor in displacement, and it also exacerbates the dangers people seeking safety face in transit. While some climate-displaced interviewees may qualify for asylum based on intersecting forms of persecution, others likely fall outside current legal frameworks, even as they face clear threats to their safety. Thus, it is essential to ensure access to asylum as well as advocate for more responsive legal protections for climate-displaced people. As advocates work to address the intersecting challenges of climate change and displacement, this research demonstrates that climate impacts are already greatly influencing mobility patterns across the region. An effective response requires ensuring and expanding access to asylum and other existing legal protections, addressing protection gaps for climate-displaced people, improving safety for people on the move, and working to mitigate life-threatening climate change impacts.

Endnotes

- 1 Int'l Refugee Assistance Project et al., *Enduring Change: A Data Review of Firsthand Accounts of Climate Mobility Impacts* (Fall 2024), <https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/enduring-change-a-data-review-of-firsthand-accounts-of-climate-mobility-impacts>.
- 2 This protection gap for climate-displaced people prompted the American Bar Association's House of Delegates to issue a resolution in February 2025, urging the United States to expand immigration pathways for climate-displaced people and support for vulnerable communities. Amanda Robert, *Climate Migrants Deserve Stronger Protections*, ABA House Says, ABA J. (Feb. 3, 2025, 2:05 PM), <https://www.abajournal.com/web/article/2025ABAMid-year-600and601-immigration>.
- 3 CBP One is a U.S. Customs and Border Protection mobile application that once allowed people to schedule appointments to enter the United States at certain land ports of entry. Starting in 2023, it was, in practice, the only way that asylum seekers arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border could seek entry to the United States and remain eligible for asylum. Am. Immigr. Council, *CBP One: An Overview*, (Mar. 24, 2025), <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/cbp-one-overview>.
- 4 See Julia Neusner, *Deadly Journeys: Climate Change, U.S. Border Enforcement, and Human Rights*, 56 Case W. Res. J. Int'l L. 337 (2024), <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/jil/vol56/iss1/16>.
- 5 Int'l Refugee Assistance Project et al., *Enduring Change: A Data Review of Firsthand Accounts of Climate Mobility Impacts* (Fall 2024), <https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/enduring-change-a-data-review-of-firsthand-accounts-of-climate-mobility-impacts>.
- 6 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Disaster Displacement: A Global Review* (May 16, 2019), <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/disaster-displacement-a-global-review/>.
- 7 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2024 *Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID)* (Displacement Advisory Comm. July 30, 2024), <https://disasterdisplacement.org/resource/grid-2024/>.
- 8 See Int'l Refugee Assistance Project et al., *Enduring Change: A Data Review of Firsthand Accounts of Climate Mobility Impacts* (Fall 2024), <https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/enduring-change-a-data-review-of-firsthand-accounts-of-climate-mobility-impacts>; Human

- Sec. Initiative, Int'l Refugee Assistance Project & U.S. Comm. for Refugees & Immigrants, *Climate of Coercion: Environmental and Other Drivers of Cross-Border Displacement in Central America and Mexico* (Mar. 2023), <https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/climate-of-coercion-environmental-and-other-drivers-of-cross-border-displacement-in-central-america-and-mexico>.
- <https://library.wmo.int/records/item/68891-state-of-the-climate-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-an-2023>.
- 9 Although earthquakes are not typically classified as climate-related disasters, we include them in our analysis because their impacts on individuals and communities often mirror those of climate-linked events and demand similar policy and humanitarian responses. Moreover, a growing body of research suggests that climate change may influence earthquake frequency. See, for example, Cecilia Hurtado & Sean F. Gallen, *Exploring the Impact of Deglaciation on Fault Slip in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Colorado, USA*, 53 *Geology* 150, 150–54 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1130/G52661.1>.
- 10 World Meteorological Organization, *State of the Climate in Latin America and the Caribbean 2023*, WMO-No. 1351 (2024), <https://library.wmo.int/records/item/68891-state-of-the-climate-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-2023>.
- 11 International Refugee Assistance Project, *Enduring Change*, 8.
- 12 See Neusner, *Deadly Journeys*, 337.
- 13 See Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* 46 (Core Writing Team, H. Lee & J. Romero eds., IPCC 2023), <https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647>; Edward Hanna et al., *Influence of High-Latitude Blocking and the Northern Stratospheric Polar Vortex on Cold-Air Outbreaks Under Arctic Amplification of Global Warming*, 3 *Environ. Res.: Climate* 042004 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1088/2752-5295/ad93f3>.
- 14 Ibid. (IPCC Synthesis Report) at 17.
- 15 International Refugee Assistance Project, *Enduring Change*, 18.
- 16 See Christina Asencio, *Trapped, Preyed Upon, and Punished*, Human Rts. First (May 7, 2024), <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/trapped-preyed-upon-and-punished>.

17 Miriam Jordan, Jazmine Ulloa & Hamed Aleaziz, *They Followed the Rules. Now Thousands of Migrants Are Told, 'Leave'*, N.Y. Times (Apr. 14, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/14/us/migrants-trump.html>.

18 Termination of Parole Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans, 89 Fed. Reg. 20650 (Mar. 25, 2025), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/03/25/2025-05128/termination-of-parole-processes-for-cubans-haitians-nicaraguans-and-venezuelans>.

19 *Securing Our Borders*, The White House (Jan. 20, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/securing-our-borders/>.

20 Ibid. at Sect. 7.

21 See, for example, Sandra Sanchez, *Rising Rio Grande Threatens Migrant Tent Encampment in Matamoros*, Border Report (July 30, 2020, 3:58 PM CDT), <https://www.wjtv.com/border-report-tour/rising-rio-grande-threatens-migrant-tent-encampment-in-matamoros/>.

22 *Putting America First in International Environmental Agreements*, The White House (Jan. 20, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements/>.

23 Ella Nilson, Trump takes an ax to more than a dozen pollution rules in rapid-fire deregulation. CNN (March 12, 2025), <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/12/climate/trump-ev-power-plant-rollbacks/index.html>.

24 Jocelyn Perry, *The Impacts of USAID Cuts: Less Climate Resilience, More Forced Displacement*, Refugees Int'l (Apr. 29, 2025), <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/the-impacts-of-usaid-cuts-less-climate-resilience-more-forced-displacement/>.

25 Policy reforms should uphold fundamental rights protected under international law, including the right to life and the right to be free from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR, Articles 6 and 7), and the rights to adequate food, housing, health, and work under the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). Reforms must also respect the right to seek asylum under the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR, Article 14) and the prohibition against returning individuals to face torture or serious harm under the *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (CAT, Article 3). The principle of non-refoulement—central to the

1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Article 33)—is further reinforced by the ICCPR, CAT, and customary international law, and binds all states regardless of treaty ratification. In addition, reforms should reflect the principles of equity under the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC), which recognize that states with greater historical responsibility for climate change bear heightened obligations to support those displaced by its effects. See CGRS, Kaldor Centre of International Refugee Law & Univ. of Essex Sch. of L. & Hum. Rts. Ctr., *International Protection for People Displaced Across Borders in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters: A Practical Toolkit* (Feb. 11, 2025), with the support of UNHCR. <https://cgrs.uclawsf.edu/our-work/publications/international-protection-people-displaced-across-borders-context-climate>.

26 Some of these recommendations are adapted from the *Legal Action Agenda for Climate Displacement*, developed by the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) and nine partner organizations working at the intersection of climate action and migrant and refugee advocacy. The Agenda outlines concrete legal and policy steps to uphold the rights and well-being of climate-displaced people across the Americas, including those displaced internally and across borders. See Int'l Refugee Assistance Project et al., *Legal Action Agenda for Climate Displacement* (Mar. 2024), <https://refugeerights.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Climate-Legal-Action-Agenda-English.pdf>. Other recommendations align with and aim to support the 2024 *Chile Declaration and Plan of Action*, adopted as part of a regional initiative commemorating the 40th anniversary of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. The Chile Declaration seeks to update and reinforce regional protection frameworks in response to contemporary drivers of displacement. It explicitly recognizes climate- and disaster-related displacement as an urgent challenge, affirms that those displaced across borders in this context may qualify for international protection, and encourages the application of existing refugee and human rights frameworks to address these evolving dynamics. See *Chile Declaration 2024: A Framework for Cooperation and Regional Solidarity to Strengthen the International Protection of Refugees, Displaced and Stateless Persons, and Implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Dec. 12, 2024, Santiago de Chile, https://www.acnur.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/Chile_Declaration_and_Plan_of_Action_ENG.pdf.

27 To support efforts to document climate displacement, IRAP has made the Climate Mobility Data Project's survey questions publicly available. Int'l Refugee Assistance Project, IRAP's *Climate Displacement Questionnaire*, <https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/irap-climate-displacement-questionnaire>.

28 For example, in 2022 Argentina created a three-year visa for people displaced by environmental disasters in Mexico, Central America, or the Caribbean (though the visa has yet to be implemented). *Disposición 891/2022*, Nat'l Directorate of Migration (May 29, 2022) <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/normativa/nacional/disposici%C3%B3n-891-2022-364999/texto>; also, in 2023, Australia and Tuvalu signed the Falepili Union, establishing a special visa that allows up to 280 Tuvaluan citizens annually to migrate permanently to Australia in response to climate threats—marking the first bilateral agreement of its kind. Migration Amendment (Australia Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty Visa) Regulations 2025 (Cth) sch 1, F2025L00183 (Austl.), https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num_reg/matfut-vr2025202500183767/sch1.html.