

The Climate-Driven Diaspora Is Here

By Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, *WIRED*, November 26th, 2024

Many places are becoming increasingly unlivable. And around one-quarter of humanity is already dealing with drought and associated food insecurity. By 2070, one-fifth of the planet could become too hot for normal human life, causing up to 3.5 billion people to move. Sea level rise alone could displace 410 million people globally by 2100.

5 We are poised to see the largest and fastest movement of people in human history. New policy frameworks will be needed. In 2025, we will begin to shift from reactive to proactive, and start to embrace the imperative of climate-driven relocation.

10 Unsurprisingly, climate-driven relocation will hit poor communities and communities of color hardest. Those with the fewest resources to adapt, who did the least to cause the climate crisis, will bear the brunt. Think of the 33 million displaced by the floods in Pakistan in 2022, with 9.4 million acres of farmland damaged or destroyed. Think of how the history of racism in America increases climate risks—formerly redlined neighborhoods have 25 percent more homes facing high flood risk. At the rate humanity continues to spew greenhouse gases, all that could be just a dress rehearsal.

15 To date, most climate migration has occurred within nations, but as the regions affected by extreme weather expand, that will need to change. We will have to be vigilant about keeping xenophobia at bay, acknowledging the cruel injustice at play as the lowest greenhouse gas emitting nations, like the Pacific islands, are the first to be inundated.

20 Where will people go? How will this be managed? One thing is certain: Ignoring the problem will not make it go away; to the contrary, it will result in chaos. At the international, national, and local levels, we will begin to develop policies to fill the current legislative and regulatory void, like restricting construction of housing in high-risk areas. One example is the State of New Jersey buying out around 200 property owners in Woodbridge Township—one of the areas most affected by flooding from Hurricane Irene in 2011 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012—to ban new construction developments and return the land to nature.

25 In 2025, at the level of individuals and families, we will see those with means start to relocate proactively. Already, 11 percent of Americans have considered moving to avoid the impacts of global warming, and roughly 75 percent are hesitant to buy homes in areas with high climate risks like wildfires (more than 30 million homes in the lower 48 US states are at risk of being hit with wildfires).

30 In 2025, continually rebuilding in the same places after extreme weather events, standard practice to date, will become widely understood as absurd. It's not that people want to move, to leave the communities and ecosystems they love and call home; it's that they must. Cultures and diasporas will start shifting to embrace this new reality. Many of them will face a stark question: What does home actually mean in the age of climate breakdown?