



Speech

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By Robert Malley, Crisis Group President & CEO

# Climate Change Is Shaping the Future of Conflict

*Crisis Group's President & CEO Robert Malley addressed the UN Security Council's virtual Arria session on climate and security risks on 22 April 2020. Without global action, he said, climate change could prove to be a slow-moving version of the current COVID-19 pandemic.*

I am honoured to be joining this Security Council Arria session on climate and security risks. The organisers had the foresight to schedule it to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Earth Day; they also had the fortune or misfortune to schedule it to coincide with the outbreak of COVID-19, an apt reminder if one were required of how global challenges necessitate a global response, and of why looming threats necessitate an urgent one. In particular, I want to thank all of today's co-hosts for calling attention to the growing peace and security implications of climate change.

I join you on behalf of the International Crisis Group's team of conflict analysts around the world. Crisis Group is an independent organisation with a mission to save lives by preventing, mitigating and resolving deadly conflict. We do so through field-based research, impartial analysis and pragmatic advocacy to shape the understanding and alter the behaviour of conflict actors and those who influence them.

So what brings us to this climate conversation? Quite simply, the conviction that climate

change is already shaping and will continue to shape the future of conflict, and that we ignore that relationship at our peril. In that sense, and as today's meeting illustrates, the climate conversation is at an inflection point. That's not only because of the latest, alarming facts on the ground. It's also a reflection of who is now and should be at the table. For years, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has documented trends that can instigate or exacerbate violence. Given the rate at which global warming is outpacing projections, the increasing rise in sea levels, the growing scarcity of resources, and the frequency of extreme weather events, it would be a dereliction of our duty if peace and security actors failed to join the diplomats, scientists, activists, and others in taking this challenge seriously.

We are relative newcomers to this conversation, and so we approach these issues with humility and have much to learn from you. But I'd like to offer a few thoughts for further discussion.

First, we should be careful to neither understate nor overstate the nature of the relationship between climate and deadly conflict. Let me be clear, independent of the links to deadly conflict, climate change is an existential challenge that puts vulnerable populations at

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*“Understanding the precise relationship [between climate and deadly conflict] matters because only from that understanding can we derive sound policy prescriptions.”*

increasing risk and requires far more robust action than we have seen so far.

But as regards the link to conflict, understanding the precise relationship matters because only from that understanding can we derive sound policy prescriptions. By not understating the causal link, I mean acknowledging that climate change is undeniably a conflict threat multiplier. We are by now all familiar with the data suggesting a 10 to twenty per cent increase in the risk of armed conflict associated with every half-degree increase in local temperatures, and that could be a conservative estimate. Researchers will of course debate the precise role of climate-related risks in any crisis, but there’s wide consensus that climate change can, for example, increase food insecurity, water scarcity and resource competition, disrupt livelihoods, and spur migration or what have been called environmental refugees. And these are all key factors that, as Crisis Group has documented for over two decades, can in turn play a key role in shaping deadly conflicts – for example, by prompting inter or intra state clashes over resources, discrediting central states, or bolstering the appeal of non-state armed groups and facilitating their recruitment drives.

At the same time, the relationship between climate and conflict is not linear; it is complex and nuanced. In some situations, small variations in climate can contribute to significant increases in violent conflict; in others, large variations in climate will not. That’s because what matters in this instance as in so many others is how authorities deal with the problems induced or exacerbated by climate change: how equitably and effectively they allocate and distribute resources; how inclusive and accountable they are; whether there are good inter-community mediation mechanisms or not. And so on.

Moreover, climate change does not necessarily trigger resource scarcity. In some

instances, it does, in others, it does not: rising temperatures and volatile rainfall mean that many areas have fewer resources, but it also means that some may have more. Greater resources may be a net positive in terms of peace and stability, although as Crisis Group has also documented it can contribute to increased competition and violence if that competition is poorly regulated by the state.

Finally, the relationship can be inverted, in that deadly conflict and political instability can contribute to climate change – for example, through illegal logging in the Amazon.

In other words, the impact of climate change on conflict is context-specific, which is why we believe that marrying the kind of granular, field based political analysis our organisation undertakes with climate expertise could produce the most effective conflict prevention outcomes.

The kinds of conflicts I refer to come in two broad categories. First are tensions within states arising from climate-related resource scarcity; these require domestic political responses that the UN may be able to support. Second are tensions between states over scarce resources – especially in the case of water – which require a diplomatic response that the UN may be able to facilitate. Drawing on recent Crisis Group reporting, I will address an example from each category in turn.

Across the Sahel and even as far south as Kenya, Crisis Group has analysed how climate-related factors have exacerbated intercommunal conflicts between herders and farmers. Peace will require states restoring their ability to peacefully regulate conflicts in those rural areas, especially in relation to disputes over inhabitable land and other resources that are

*“Deadly conflict and political instability can contribute to climate change.”*



UN peacekeepers walk through water in Boma state, South Sudan, after heavy rains and floods forced hundreds of thousands of people to leave their homes in November 2019. REUTERS/Andreea Campeanu

becoming scarcer due to rising temperatures and variable rainfall.

To take one specific instance, northern Nigeria has experienced large declines in the length of the rainy season and an increase in desert or semi-desert conditions over recent decades. These changes have dried up many natural water sources, diminishing pastures and farmland. In the northern states most directly impacted, they have exacerbated long-running contests between herders and farmers sharing the same resources. They are also forcing large numbers of herders in search of productive land to migrate south, resulting in increasing conflicts between them and central Nigeria's growing populations of sedentary crop farmers. This violence has increased Nigeria's security challenges and stretched the military from a much-needed focus on Boko Haram.

When states fail to address these intercommunal tensions, then a variety of armed groups – including criminals and jihadists – are able to fill that vacuum and violently exploit the distrust of governments among marginalised rural communities. But while military measures against

such groups are necessary, an effective response cannot only be security based: there needs to be a political component, such as the promotion of inclusive dialogues to reduce intercommunal tensions and engage armed groups; an economic dimension, including ways to formalise the grey economy and to reform the livestock sector; and a climate dimension, including prioritising humanitarian assistance to those most affected by environmental changes.

Moving on to inter-state dynamics, Crisis Group has also looked at the transboundary water conflicts around the Nile river basin, and specifically the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Since 2010, Ethiopia has been building the dam on the Blue Nile River as its highest development priority. Given the Blue Nile is the main tributary of the Nile River, Egypt fears the dam threatens its water supply.

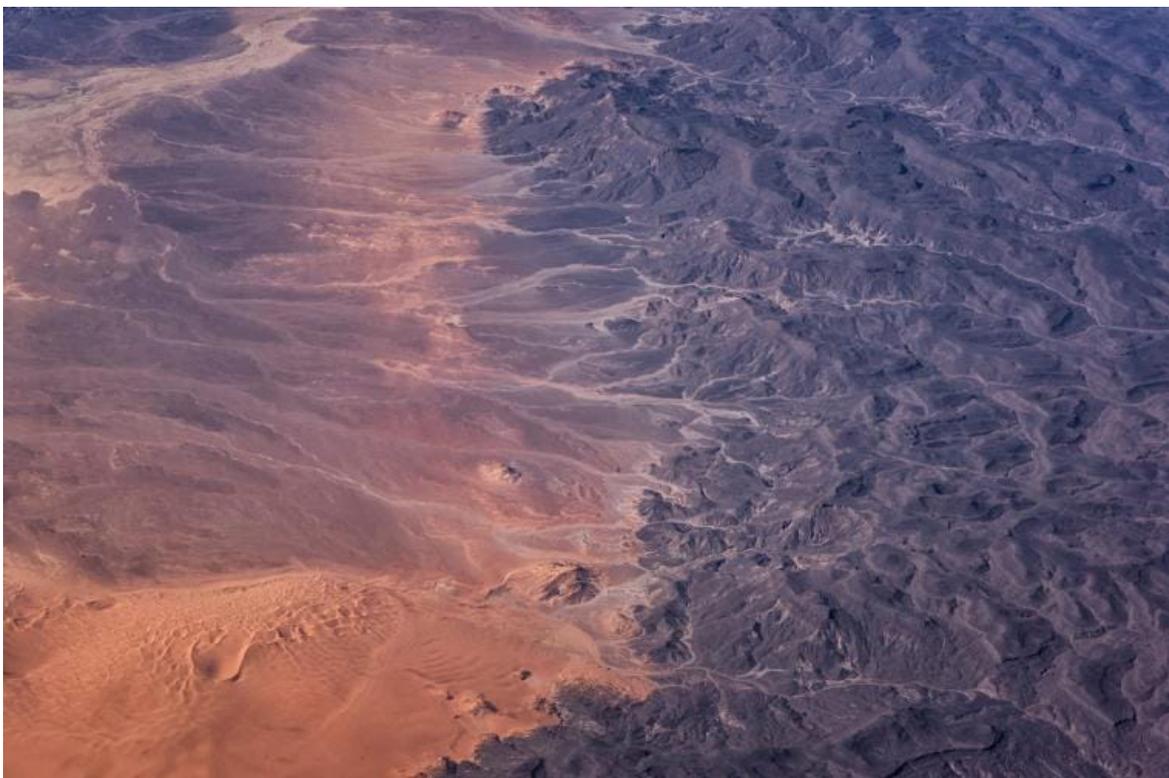
A tough negotiation has been made even harder as rising temperatures and falling precipitation trends are likely to lead to increased water scarcity across the Nile Basin. Over the last few years, technical experts from both countries and Sudan, which is also impacted,

had neared a consensus about how fast Ethiopia could fill the dam's reservoir to minimise downstream impacts. Those talks have since run into new obstacles, but what is most striking about this example is not only how a resource-scarcity issue around water rights has been intensified by climate change conditions, but also how the resulting diplomatic negotiations could strengthen regional institutions that can address both climate change and conflict issues in the future. So while these negotiations are far from complete, there is at least some reason to be hopeful that climate-induced urgency will prompt action.

We have, of course, much more to learn about links between instability, conflict and climate. For now, and beyond the need to devote increasing attention to the politics of climate-related security risks, I'd propose two steps to make our collective policy response more effective: first, we have to shorten the timeline used to assess climate risks; second, we should prioritise geographies where climate risks intersect with fragile politics.

Until recently, the tendency was to discuss climate change on the 10- or 15-year timelines of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports. But as you all know, the peace and security community operates on a much shorter timeline. Our goal should be to document closer to real time which areas are experiencing the fastest effects of climate change, when further environmental changes could occur, and what they might look like.

Second, as I mentioned, just as climate risks vary based on different geographies, so too do conflict risks vary based on different politics. Political decisions matter greatly when it comes to how resources are allocated and who can access them, whether distribution is viewed as equitable and fair or iniquitous, and those issues matter greatly when it comes to conflict risks. So we must ask where among the set of most likely climate crises are existing institutions and state capacity weakest, and recommend appropriate policy steps to strengthen those institutions and the effectiveness of state responses.



Crisis Group works to mitigate the effects that climate change can have on violent conflict around the world, including in Africa's Sahel region (pictured). CRISIS GROUP/Jorge Gutierrez Lucena



Crisis Group's President & CEO Robert Malley addresses the UN Security Council's virtual Arria session on climate and security risks on 22 April 2020.

In closing, I wanted to briefly comment on COVID-19, both generally and with respect to climate specifically. The pandemic clearly presents an era-defining challenge to public health and the global economy. Its political consequences, both short- and long-term, will only gradually become clearer. At Crisis Group, we are paying close attention to places where the global health challenge intersects with political conditions that could give rise to new crises or exacerbate existing ones.

More specifically, it is worth reflecting on how COVID-19 may impact the politics of climate change. True, there has been a recent reduction in carbon emissions, but it could prove short-lived. Two economic factors are likely to complicate efforts: the price of oil has dropped precipitously, which may slow

investments in renewable energy, and there is the risk of a global economic recession, which would constrain the already limited time and resources available to policymakers on many other issues, including climate change. As a result, the policy challenges ahead will be significant in addressing both climate change itself and its relationship to conflict.

But there is one overriding political message we should take from COVID-19, which is that without prompt global, collective action, climate change could prove to be the slow-moving version of the coronavirus outbreak, reshaping economic, political and security conditions around the world.

We have no alternative but to push forward – and for that effort, I thank all of you and look forward to hearing from you.