

20 April 2020

Mr. António Guterres  
Secretary-General of the United Nations  
405 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, NEW YORK, NY, 10017, USA

Dear Mr Guterres,

I am writing to you today urging you to consider global climate change and its subsequent impacts as the highest priority for the United Nations (UN) to consider.

While many of my colleagues may impress upon you the importance of the current COVID-19 crisis, climate change remains the highest priority issue as ignoring the matter has the most far-reaching consequences for human security, the potential for domestic and international conflict and clear impacts to the health, liberty and prosperity of all people on earth (Detraz 2011).

Further, as the impacts of climate change are likely to affect different parts of the world in different ways and at a different pace it is likely that as various nation states implement their respective policies that we could see a rise in nationalism (Detraz 2011) and an increase in environmental refugees, and displaced persons (Lister 2019). This will see the world's most vulnerable at a disproportionality greater risk to the consequences of climate change (Verchick 2010, p 167). In the face of this anarchical approach to the problem it is critical the UN take a lead role in guiding the world toward action to slow, halt and reverse climate change.

A strong global approach is required in the face of an entrenched self-interested and nationalistic approach from various nation states (Ahmed 2010, p.16). China, the world's largest economy (Central Intelligence Agency 2020) is continuing to increase its coal consumption (Lister 2019) while the second largest economy, The United States of America (USA) (Central Intelligence Agency 2020) has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and seems to be implementing measures that may further exacerbate climate change (Lister 2019). As the impacts of climate change continue to impact "a range of systems and sectors including water resources, health and food production" (McDonald

2010, p. 50) the impacts on human security will become more widespread (Barnett & Adger 2007). This arguably represents a great threat to human security.

While many are emphasising the impacts of the current zoonotic virus, COVID-19 to human security (UN Environment Programme 2020), it is important to note that while an urgent global issue, it is arguably not as important as a sustained and long-term global approach to addressing climate change. Pandemics are but one potential symptom of continued inaction on climate change, which is predicted to have a direct impact on the type and number of pathogens and hosts (Detraz 2011) and changes to the distribution of vectors for the spread of infectious disease (IPCC 2007, p. 12) continued climate change is being increasingly linked to the potential for further zoonotic epidemics (UNEP 2016, p. 22). Combining the risk of further outbreaks with the potential for severe climatic events and reduced access to safe food via changes to food supply chains (Gregory et al 2005) and drinking water, will all make people more susceptible to disease (Brown et al 2007) and conspire against human health security. The health impacts of climate change are so concerning that in 2019 the Australian Medical Association declared climate change a health emergency (The Lancet 2020, p. 165). The 2019-2020 Australian bushfires, linked to climate change (Philips & Nogrady 2020) contributed to spikes in exposure to poor air quality (The Lancet 2020, p. 165) and continued exposure of this kind has been linked in early studies by Harvard University to increased death rates in people infected with COVID-19 (Singh 2020).

As health impacts continue to emerge from the effects of climate change nation states may be increasingly inclined to adopt securitisation methods similar to those currently being employed to address the COVID-19 pandemic with individual freedom of movement being restricted in many cases to the confines of our homes. (Giacometti 2020).

However, these indirect effects are nothing compared to the ultimate example of a complete and permanent deprivation of human security, for example, “sinking islands” where rising sea levels in nation-states such as Kiribati and Tuvalu make these places uninhabitable (Lister 2019) and leave the inhabitants of these places with no form of security (Mjøs 2007).

Some postulate that with increased scarcity of resources, including arable and habitable lands required to maintain human security becomes more prolific violent armed conflict will occur more frequently (Detraz 2011). There is evidence that the Dafur conflict may have been exacerbated by climate change (Detraz 2011), and reduced access to water contributed in the destabilisation of Syria (Lister 2019). These kinds of conflicts cause many people to flee, resulting in forced migration (Lister 2019) as well as the direct drivers of climate change for people to seek arable land, both of which have the potential to further inflame conflicts within and between nation states (Detraz 2011) leading to further forced migration and a continuing cycle of force migration and destabilisation.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 immigration has become increasingly securitised (Karyotis 2017) and in more recent history increasingly securitised because of the effects of climate change. During and in the aftermath of cyclone Durian citizens of the Bahamas for whom visa free entry to the USA would otherwise be permitted were prevented from entering the USA as they attempted to flee the disaster (Lister 2019), as these “Climate Refugees” do not currently enjoy the protection offered by the UNHCR Refugee Convention 1951 (Lister 2019) a global approach is required to halt an anarchical securitisation of climate induced forced migration.

The Commission of the European Communities has contemplated the importance of considering climate change in their migration policies (2007) however further global solutions are required. Some have said that only access to new lands for people displaced for environmental reasons would allow them to live decent lives (Lister 2019), which of course, further creates tensions over the scarce resource of land and brings together people that may have previously not come into contact and therefore conflict. This raises questions as to how the rule of law would be applied to fairly re-distribute property rights within domestic borders (Detraz 2011).

The UN has a critical role to play in climate change in emphasising the human security aspects of climate change over matters of state security for individual nation states. If the latter is allowed to dominate the climate change debate, there is the potential that individual nation states may emphasise state security and stability over environmental

concerns and human security which may ultimately exacerbate human vulnerabilities (Verchick 2010, p 167.) and shift attention away from policies which actually address climate change (Detraz 2011).

For reasons outlined above, climate change represents a threat to human security through disruption to the habitability of land, increased health issues, disruption to food security, forced migration, conflict and securitisation (Detraz 2011). Given the current retrograde steps being taken by the world's biggest economies (Lister 2019), and the impact that an anarchical nation state based approach to securitisation of climate change would have on vulnerable people (Detraz 2011), this issue is the most important and urgent matter currently requiring the UN's attention.

As the world emerges from the ravages of the current COVID-19 crisis a unique opportunity exists to restart and stimulate new businesses and reskill and deploy workers re-entering employment to focus on solutions that allow the world to systematically address climate change (University of Pennsylvania 2020 and Ahmed 2010, p.16) and develop laws to underpin community health and build "social infrastructure" (Verchick 2010, p 166.). While some have supported this transition (Tienhaara 2020) there are also suggestions that other nations may use this recovery as an excuse to flout commitments to climate change (Pearl 2020). For this reason, for the transition to an economy that addresses climate change to flourish requires strong global leadership and political will that can only be brought to bear by a truly global organisation like the United Nations.

Yours Sincerely

Greg Tho

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