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UN: Human Rights Crucial in Addressing Climate Change

Paris Agreement Should Ensure Transparency, Accountability and Participation

(Paris) – Country delegates to the climate change meeting in Paris have overwhelmingly supported integrating human rights into the emerging international agreement, Human Rights Watch said today. The United Nations Conference on Climate Change, attended by more than 190 world leaders, continues through December 11.

Many country delegates have emphasized that effectively addressing climate change requires the protection of human rights, including the rights of indigenous peoples, women and girls, people with disabilities, and migrants and refugees. The current draft also emphasizes ensuring gender equality, food security, intergenerational equity, the integrity of natural ecosystems, and a just transition of the workforce.



Boys herding goats find shelter from the midday sun under a tree.

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“Climate change disproportionately affects people who are already vulnerable, especially in countries with limited resources and fragile ecosystems,” said Joe Amon, health and human rights director at Human Rights Watch. “In the global response to climate change, we need to ensure that human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.”

Attention to human rights has not always been central in past climate change negotiations, Human Rights Watch said. The Kyoto Protocol negotiated in 1997 did not include any reference to human rights. However, following climate change negotiations in Cancun in 2010, increasing attention has been given to the importance of human rights in the response to climate change. Prior to this week’s meeting, the extent to which human rights language would be incorporated in the Paris agreement had been uncertain.

Canada’s new government has been an outspoken advocate for attention to human rights, as have the Philippines, Costa Rica, Mexico, Chile, and other Latin American countries. Delegates from a number of countries have emphasized that including human rights language underscores core principles relevant to mitigating and adapting to climate change, and provides guidance to governments on their obligations to ensure that human rights are protected in carrying out the agreement.

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Joe Amon

Director, Health and Human Rights

Some governments have expressed concerns about including human rights language in the implementing provisions of the agreement. That is especially true of developed countries that are responsible for the vast majority of carbon emissions that are the cause of climate change.

“Beyond the agreement that is negotiated in Paris, countries are going to face tough challenges to reduce carbon emissions and to respond to the impact of climate change,” Amon said. “It’s going to be critically important for governments to be transparent and accountable and to include vulnerable populations in the planning and implementation of the agreement.”

The Human Rights & Climate Change Working Group held a news conference on December 3rd at which three constituency groups officially recognized by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—the Indigenous Peoples’ Caucus, the Trade Unions-Nongovernmental Organizations, and the Women & Gender Constituency—as well as other working groups, described the impact that climate change is already having on human rights.

The participants emphasized that including human rights in the section of the agreement stating the overall purpose (Article 2) will be crucial for an effective response. Andrea Carmen, representing the Indigenous Peoples’ Caucus, highlighted the importance of a strong statement of the rights of indigenous peoples in the implementing provisions of the agreement. Bridget Burns, from the Women’s Environment and Development Organization and representing the Women & Gender Constituency, underscored recognition of rights in the agreement’s operative text as critical to protecting the rights of women and gender equality.

“Climate change is not only an ecological crisis. Health, lives and livelihoods are at stake.” Amon said. “Respect by governments of their human rights obligations are not only consistent with the goals of the climate change agreement, but critical to ensuring its success.”

Region / Country Global

Topic Environment, Environment and Health

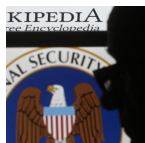
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