

Developing countries will suffer most from sea level rise

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Developing countries will suffer most from sea-level rise resulting from global warming, with potentially hundreds of millions of people in developing country coastal regions being forced to relocate, according to a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development.

Of the 300 million people who could be forced to relocate by rapid sea level rise, 80 percent live in the developing world, including 200 million in Asia (90 million in China alone); 17 million in the Middle East and North Africa; 11 million in Sub-Saharan Africa; and 8 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, said David Wheeler, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development.

"We confront a stark reality here. Millions of poor people will be displaced by sea-level rise that has been caused by the affluent West. When this happens, current international turbulence may seem placid by comparison," Wheeler said.

Wheeler said that the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released in Paris today, strengthens the scientific consensus about the threat from global warming if we don't curb greenhouse gas emissions. But he said that the IPCC's projected sea level rise of 0.2 - 0.6 meters by 2100 is very conservative, because it excludes the possibility of future rapid changes in the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets, although recent scientific evidence suggests that such changes have begun.

"In the case of Greenland, no one believes that its ice cap will survive sustained temperatures in the range that the IPCC projects," Wheeler said. "Ultimately it will disappear, adding 7 meters to sea level. The argument is about timing, not results, and some scientists think that rapid melting will occur in this century. Disintegration of the West Antarctica ice sheet would add another 7 meters."

Before joining CGD in December, Wheeler was part of a team at the World Bank that studied the likely impact of rapid sea level rise on human settlements and economic activity. The projection of 300 million people who could be dislocated, based on the latest digital map of global population, includes all coastal populations living in areas less than 5 meters above sea level. Any significant sea-level rise will lead to more severe flooding in these areas from storm surges and abnormally high tides.

"If we don't curb greenhouse gas emissions, there is a significant risk that global warming will raise the sea level by 1-3 meters in this century," Wheeler said. "According to our World Bank study, even a 1-meter rise will force 60 million people to relocate."

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