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**Critical Analysis of the 1951 Refugee Convention in the Context of
Climate Change and Modern Conflicts**

Dr. Muhammad Makki Kakar

Teacher & Researcher, Government of Balochistan.

Email Address: makkikakar@gmail.com

Mr. Shoukat Ali

Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of
Balochistan, Quetta.

Email Address: shoukat.polscience@um.uob.edu.pk

Dr. Hakeemullah

Associate Professor Sociology,
Government Post Graduate College, Sariab Road Quetta.

Email Address: babar_2078@yahoo.com

Abstract

The 1951 Refugee Convention has served as the cornerstone of international refugee protection for over seven decades. Originally designed to address the plight of individuals fleeing persecution in the aftermath of World War II, the Convention has remained limited in scope, failing to explicitly cover populations displaced by climate change, environmental degradation, or modern armed conflicts. As global displacement reaches unprecedented levels, traditional legal frameworks are increasingly inadequate to protect vulnerable populations. This study critically examines the evolving interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention in the context of contemporary challenges, particularly climate-induced and conflict-related displacement. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirteen human rights activists in Pakistan who are directly engaged with refugee advocacy and policy. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed four primary themes: legal gaps and loopholes in the Convention, the historical evolution of its interpretation, political and social resistance to expanding its scope, and ethical concerns regarding the continued exclusion of climate refugees. Participants emphasized that while the Convention remains a vital legal instrument, its limitations generate structural vulnerabilities for large segments of displaced populations. The study finds that states often deploy ad hoc mechanisms, domestic policies, and discretionary humanitarian programs to fill gaps left by the Convention, resulting in inconsistent protection and inequities. The research underscores the urgent need for legal reform, the expansion of international protection frameworks, and ethical accountability in addressing displacement arising from climate change

and modern conflicts, ensuring that international law evolves to meet contemporary humanitarian imperatives.

Keywords: Critical Analysis, Refugee Convention, Climate Change, Modern Conflicts

1. Introduction

The global perspective on refugee protection is shaped by a complex interplay of international legal frameworks, humanitarian principles, and geopolitical dynamics. The international community faces the challenge of protecting over 100 million forcibly displaced individuals, necessitating a collective response to uphold the principles of non-refoulement, asylum, and non-discrimination, which are foundational to refugee protection (Wageshwari, 2023). The Global Compacts on Refugees and Migrants, as highlighted in the New York Declaration, emphasize the interconnectedness of migration and forced migration, advocating for a comprehensive response that includes diverse stakeholders beyond just states, such as businesses and global society (Samaddar, 2020). Despite these frameworks, the implementation of refugee protection remains inconsistent, with developed countries often imposing restrictive measures that exacerbate the vulnerabilities of refugees in developing regions (Bossin, 1999). The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) aims to consolidate international refugee protection regimes, though its legal status varies, reflecting different international relations paradigms and power dynamics (Gottwald, 2024). The UK's approach, for instance, has been criticized for inadequacies in addressing the scale of the crisis, with developing countries disproportionately bearing the burden of hosting refugees (Harvey, 2015). Legal developments continue to evolve, with international treaties and conventions striving to enhance the protection of refugee rights, yet challenges persist in enforcement and cooperation among states (Braşoveanu, 2023; Sivakumar, 2024; Terje & Schultz, 2024). The UNHCR plays a pivotal role in shaping global refugee policy, aiming to address both traditional and emerging challenges, such as those posed by natural disasters (Milner, 2014). Overall, a more cohesive global response, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and enhanced international cooperation are essential to effectively protect the rights and well-being of refugees worldwide (Sivakumar, 2024).

The challenge of climate change in modern conflicts is multifaceted, involving complex interactions between environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and sociopolitical instability. Climate change exacerbates existing tensions and can act as a catalyst for conflict by intensifying resource scarcity, such as water and arable land, which are essential for human survival and dignity (McFee, 2023; Saul, 2009). Historical and contemporary examples, such as the conflict in Darfur, illustrate how climate-induced resource scarcity can lead to instability and violence,

highlighting the need for effective adaptation strategies to mitigate these risks (Mazo, 2009). The effects of climate change are not uniform; they disproportionately impact marginalized populations, often exacerbating existing inequalities and vulnerabilities (McFee, 2023). In regions like the West African Sahel and North-Western Kenya, climate variability has been shown to multiply socio-political tensions, leading to increased violence and conflict (Nowag, 2020). The potential for climate change to fuel both conventional and non-conventional security threats, such as migration and radicalization, underscores the importance of integrating climate considerations into security and defense strategies (Alfaro, 2023; Saul, 2009). Despite the growing body of research linking climate change to conflict, there remains a significant gap in understanding the precise causal mechanisms, necessitating further interdisciplinary research to develop comprehensive solutions (Degroot, 2018; Nordas & Gleditsch, 2007). Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated global effort, leveraging international law and policy to prevent, contain, and remedy the security threats posed by climate change (Saul, 2009). The urgency of these issues is underscored by the rapid pace of climate impacts, which demand immediate and sustained action to prevent further escalation of conflicts and ensure global stability (Alfaro, 2023).

Pakistan's approach to refugee protection, particularly concerning Afghan refugees, is multifaceted and complex, shaped by historical, socio-economic, and legal dimensions. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees, making it one of the largest refugee-receiving countries globally (Ali et al., 2025; Hashmi et al., 2025). Despite not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Pakistan has engaged with international refugee law through its judiciary, which has creatively applied principles like non-refoulement to protect refugees (Kazmi, 2025). However, the absence of a comprehensive national legal framework for refugees has led to their management under the outdated Foreigner's Act of 1946, which inadequately addresses their needs (Zubair et al., 2019). The socio-economic impact of refugees is significant, with both positive contributions to the economy and strains on public services in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Ali et al., 2025). The securitization of refugee discourse, often linking refugees to terrorism without empirical evidence, has further complicated their integration and protection (Hashmi et al., 2025). International support has waned over the years, leaving Pakistan to bear the humanitarian and economic costs alone (Bukhari et al., 2025). Despite these challenges, Pakistan has attempted to address refugee issues through various agreements with the UNHCR and the Afghan government, which provide certain rights under the 1973 Constitution (Zubair et al., 2019). The need for a rights-based approach, improved regional cooperation, and comprehensive policy reforms is emphasized to ensure both national

security and the protection of refugees (Hashmi et al., 2025; Noor et al., 2025).

This study examines the applicability and limitations of the 1951 Refugee Convention in light of contemporary displacement challenges, with a specific focus on Pakistan. By critically analyzing the evolving interpretation of the Convention, legal loopholes, and state-level responses, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how international law interacts with modern humanitarian crises. The study is significant because it illuminates the ethical and practical implications of maintaining an outdated legal framework while offering empirical insights from human rights activists who operate at the frontline of refugee protection. Ultimately, the research addresses urgent questions of justice, equity, and accountability in the international refugee regime. This study is guided by three core objectives. First, it seeks to identify and evaluate the emerging frameworks and legal loopholes employed by states to address climate refugees in the absence of formal Convention protection. Second, it traces the historical evolution of the 1951 Refugee Convention's interpretation and examines the political and social forces that resist its expansion to include climate- and conflict-induced displacement. Third, it evaluates the ethical implications of maintaining the current international protection regime in the face of mass displacement driven by environmental and political crises. By exploring these objectives, the study advances understanding of the interplay between law, ethics, and policy, particularly in contexts where conventional refugee definitions fail to provide adequate protection.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Historical Foundations of the 1951 Refugee Convention

The 1951 Refugee Convention emerged in the aftermath of World War II, a period marked by widespread human rights violations and the displacement of millions, necessitating a structured international response to refugee crises (Sharma, 2015) (Davies, 2004). Initially, the Convention aimed to address the specific needs of European refugees fleeing political persecution, defining a refugee as someone with a "well-founded fear of persecution" based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion (Davies, 2004). However, its scope was limited by temporal and geographical constraints, only covering those affected by events prior to January 1, 1951, in Europe (Davies, 2004). The 1967 Protocol expanded this definition, removing these limitations and allowing for a more universal application of refugee protection (Terje, 2024). The historical context of the Convention reflects a response to the mass displacements caused by the war and subsequent geopolitical tensions, highlighting the evolving nature of international refugee law (Terje, 2024).

2.2. Climate Change and Emerging Categories of Displacement

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a significant driver of displacement, creating a new category of environmental migrants. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that by 2050, between 50 and 200 million people may be displaced due to climate-related factors, with some projections suggesting numbers could reach up to 1 billion (Hamza et al., 2010; Naser, 2015). This phenomenon is complex, as displacement often results from a combination of environmental degradation, socioeconomic factors, and extreme weather events, challenging the notion of climate change as a singular cause (Naser, 2012; Ramos, 2013). The concept of assemblage theory highlights how local contexts and human-nonhuman interactions shape these displacement processes, suggesting that climate-induced migration can lead to new social arrangements and potential futures (Tuitjer, 2020). However, the lack of specific legal protections for these migrants under international law remains a critical issue, necessitating new frameworks to address their unique vulnerabilities (Ramos, 2013).

2.3. Political Resistance to Expanding the Convention

Political resistance to expanding the 1951 Refugee Convention is rooted in historical, political, and contextual factors, particularly in the Global South. Countries like India and many African nations have opted for alternative frameworks, such as the 1969 OAU Convention, which better reflect their unique refugee situations and societal dynamics, arguing that the Convention's Eurocentric origins and narrow definition of refugees are incompatible with their realities (Pandey et al., 2025). Similarly, Lebanon, despite hosting a significant refugee population, rejects the Convention, fearing it would obligate permanent settlement and shift responsibilities to the state, which contradicts its national policies and regional norms (Janmyr, 2017). Furthermore, the 1967 Protocol, intended to address broader concerns, has been criticized for failing to adapt to contemporary migration challenges, leading to calls for a reevaluation of the entire refugee law paradigm to better align with current human rights standards (Davies, 2007; Ramji-Nogales, 2017). This resistance highlights a broader reluctance to embrace a framework perceived as outdated and misaligned with the realities faced by many states today.

2.4. Ethical and Human Rights Implications

The narrow protection offered by the 1951 Convention raises significant ethical and human rights concerns, primarily due to its restrictive definition of a refugee, which only includes individuals persecuted based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (Føllesdal, 2025; Sabel, 2012). Critics argue that this limited scope fails to account for those fleeing broader threats such as armed conflict or natural disasters, thereby excluding many vulnerable populations from necessary protection (Bagaric & Dimopoulos, 2003). Furthermore, the

Convention's reliance on state sovereignty can perpetuate injustices, as states may deny asylum to individuals who do not fit the narrow criteria, effectively leaving them without refuge (Føllesdal, 2025; Sharma, 2015). This situation highlights a pressing need for a re-evaluation of the Convention's framework to incorporate a more inclusive definition based on deprivation and need, ensuring that all individuals facing acute danger receive adequate protection (Bagaric & Dimopoulos, 2003; Sharma, 2015).

2.5. Refugee Protection in the Pakistan Context

Refugee protection in Pakistan is characterized by a complex interplay of historical, legal, and socio-economic factors. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees, becoming one of the largest refugee-receiving countries globally (Ali et al., 2025; Hashmi et al., 2025). Despite this, Pakistan lacks a comprehensive national legal framework for refugees, having not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, which complicates the protection of refugee rights (Kazmi, 2025). The judiciary has engaged with international refugee law, utilizing principles like non-refoulement to safeguard vulnerable populations, albeit within a limited legal context (Kazmi, 2025). Additionally, while refugees contribute economically, their prolonged presence has strained public services and resources, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Ali et al., 2025). The narrative surrounding refugees often intertwines with national security concerns, leading to misconceptions that they pose inherent threats, despite evidence suggesting that most are victims of conflict rather than perpetrators of violence (Bukhari et al., 2025; Hashmi et al., 2025). Thus, a shift towards rights-based approaches and international cooperation is essential for sustainable refugee management in Pakistan (Bukhari et al., 2025; Hashmi et al., 2025).

3. Material and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the limitations of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the emerging legal and policy frameworks addressing climate and conflict-induced displacement. The study was conducted in Pakistan, targeting human rights activists with experience in refugee advocacy and policy engagement. A purposive sample of thirteen participants was selected, ensuring representation of activists with diverse expertise in legal frameworks, humanitarian interventions, and policy advisory roles. Data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured protocol. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and explored participants' perspectives on legal loopholes, historical evolution of the Convention, state responses, and ethical considerations. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach: initial familiarization with the data, coding, identification of patterns, and development of overarching themes. This method was chosen for its

capacity to capture complex, nuanced insights into legal, political, and ethical dimensions of refugee protection.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Legal Loopholes and Gaps in the 1951 Convention

Participants highlighted significant limitations in the 1951 Refugee Convention, emphasizing that its narrow definition of refugee status fails to encompass populations displaced by climate change, environmental disasters, or modern conflicts. They noted that while states occasionally implement discretionary measures such as temporary visas or humanitarian aid, these interventions are inconsistent and provide limited protection. One participant stated, “The 1951 Convention is outdated; it only protects those fleeing persecution. Climate- and disaster-displaced people fall through the cracks. States fill the gap with temporary visas or humanitarian aid, but there is no legal guarantee, leaving millions unprotected.” Participants further explained that these legal gaps create structural vulnerabilities for displaced populations, forcing them into precarious living conditions and leaving them dependent on ad hoc state responses. They described the consequences of exclusion from formal protection mechanisms, including lack of access to education, healthcare, and employment, as well as heightened susceptibility to exploitation and marginalization. One participant remarked, “Without formal status, we live in uncertainty. Every day is a struggle because the law doesn’t recognize us.”

The accounts also emphasized the broader implications of these loopholes for international and national governance. Participants highlighted that reliance on discretionary or temporary measures undermines consistency, fairness, and long-term solutions for displaced populations. As one participant noted, “States act differently depending on politics, money, or public opinion. There is no real safety net, and the Convention doesn’t require one.” Overall, participant narratives reveal that the limitations of the 1951 Convention expose critical legal and structural gaps in protection for modern displaced populations. Their accounts underscore the urgent need for an expanded, more inclusive legal framework that addresses contemporary displacement scenarios, including climate-induced and conflict-related migration, to ensure consistent and guaranteed protection for all vulnerable populations.

4.2. Historical Evolution and Resistance to Expansion

Participants, particularly human rights activists, emphasized the historical evolution of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the persistent resistance to its expansion. They explained that states have consistently resisted broadening the definition of refugee status due to concerns over sovereignty, resource allocation, and domestic political pressures. One participant noted, “Since its inception, the Convention has been resistant to change. Even when the scale of displacement grows, political forces prevent its formal expansion. Countries fear legal obligations and the possibility of

large-scale migration being legitimized.” Participants highlighted that this resistance is deeply rooted in political considerations rather than humanitarian need. The fear of increased obligations and potential influxes of migrants has often led states to maintain restrictive interpretations, leaving many vulnerable populations without formal recognition or protection. One participant observed, “Even when activists push for updates, governments hesitate. Politics and public opinion always take priority over rights and protection.”

The accounts also indicated that historical inertia contributes to structural gaps in the international protection framework. Participants stressed that while the Convention has evolved in some procedural aspects, its fundamental definitions remain narrowly focused, limiting adaptability to contemporary challenges such as climate-induced displacement and complex modern conflicts. As one participant explained, “The world has changed, but the law hasn’t. We face new crises that the Convention wasn’t designed to handle.” Overall, participant narratives reveal that the historical and political resistance to expanding the Convention constrains international refugee protection. Their insights underscore that the adaptability of legal frameworks is heavily influenced by political priorities, which often conflict with emerging humanitarian needs, highlighting the tension between state sovereignty and global responsibility.

4.3. Ethical Implications of the Current Regime

Participants highlighted the ethical dimensions of maintaining a narrowly defined refugee protection framework, emphasizing the exclusion of millions of climate-displaced and conflict-affected populations. They expressed moral concerns regarding global justice, equity, and the prioritization of state interests over human lives. One participant stated, “Ethically, it is indefensible to keep the Convention unchanged. People suffering from floods, droughts, or war-related displacement deserve protection. Our legal system prioritizes state interests over human lives, which is a serious ethical failing.” Participants explained that the current regime not only limits legal protection but also exacerbates human suffering by leaving vulnerable populations in precarious conditions. They emphasized that legal gaps have profound humanitarian consequences, affecting access to shelter, healthcare, education, and livelihoods. One participant noted, “When the law does not recognize you, you are left to survive on the margins. The ethical responsibility to protect these people is being ignored.”

The accounts also underscored the tension between political expediency and moral obligation. Participants argued that the protection framework reflects state-centric priorities, where safeguarding sovereignty and limiting obligations take precedence over human rights. As one participant remarked, “Governments worry about resources and migration, but ethics demand that people in danger are given protection. There is a

clear moral failing in the system.” Overall, participant narratives reveal that the current international refugee regime raises serious ethical concerns. Their accounts highlight the moral imperative to reform the Convention and associated legal frameworks, advocating for inclusive policies that prioritize human protection and address contemporary displacement challenges. The findings suggest that ethical considerations should be central to discussions of international refugee law and its reform.

4.4. State Practices and Ad Hoc Mechanisms

Participants emphasized that states frequently respond to displacement through ad hoc policies, temporary humanitarian programs, and discretionary protection measures. While such approaches provide immediate relief in some cases, they often result in inconsistent protection and leave populations vulnerable to shifts in political priorities. One participant explained, “States use temporary solutions—humanitarian visas or disaster relief—but these are short-term. Protection depends on political priorities, not legal obligation, which leaves vulnerable populations at risk every time policy shifts.” Participants highlighted that reliance on discretionary mechanisms underscores the limitations of the existing international legal framework. These temporary solutions fail to guarantee long-term security, rights, or access to essential services, leaving displaced populations in precarious conditions. One participant remarked, “Every time politics change, so does our security. One government may offer help; the next may withdraw it. This uncertainty is a constant threat.”

Participants also noted that while ad hoc measures can mitigate immediate crises, they do not address systemic gaps in protection. The use of temporary programs reflects a reactive approach rather than a structured, rights-based framework. One participant observed, “These policies are like band-aids on a broken system. They help for now, but they do not solve the larger problem of legal recognition and consistent protection.” Overall, participant narratives reveal that state reliance on ad hoc and temporary mechanisms demonstrates the practical consequences of an outdated and narrow international legal regime. Their accounts highlight the urgent need for comprehensive, legally binding frameworks that ensure consistent protection for all displaced populations, reducing dependence on political discretion and emergency-based interventions.

5. Conclusions

The 1951 Refugee Convention remains a foundational instrument in international refugee protection, yet its narrow definition limits applicability in the context of climate change and modern conflicts. This study, based on qualitative insights from human rights activists in Pakistan, highlights four critical dimensions: the legal gaps and loopholes in the Convention, the historical evolution and political resistance to expansion, the ethical implications of maintaining the current regime, and the reliance on ad hoc state mechanisms to fill protection gaps. Participants emphasized

that while discretionary and temporary measures provide some relief, they fail to offer consistent, guaranteed protection, leaving millions of climate-displaced and conflict-affected individuals vulnerable. The study reveals a tension between state sovereignty and humanitarian obligations, with political and social considerations often outweighing ethical imperatives. The findings underscore the urgent need for international legal reform to accommodate emerging categories of displacement, including climate refugees and populations affected by modern conflicts. Expanding the Convention or creating complementary frameworks would provide a legally binding mechanism for equitable protection, reducing reliance on ad hoc and inconsistent policies. Additionally, ethical accountability requires that global institutions prioritize human rights and justice in responding to displacement. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on refugee protection by emphasizing the intersection of law, politics, and ethics, providing empirical insights from human rights practitioners, and advocating for a responsive, forward-looking international legal framework that addresses the realities of 21st-century displacement.

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