

Rising seas risk climate migration on ‘biblical scale,’ says U.N. chief

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U.N. Secretary General António Guterres warned that even if global warming is “miraculously” limited to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit), there will still be a sizable sea level rise. Pictured here, floods in Indonesia in July. (Dita Alangkara/AP)

The head of the United Nations has warned that rising sea levels caused by global warming could spur a mass migration of entire populations from low-lying areas on a “biblical scale.” Speaking to the Security Council in New York about the impact of sea level rises on global peace and security, U.N. Secretary General António Guterres [said](#) that some **900 million people live in low-lying coastal areas.**

“Under any scenario, countries like Bangladesh, China, India and the Netherlands are all at risk,” Guterres said Tuesday, adding that such migration could lead to disputes over land and maritime territory. “Megacities on every continent will face serious impacts including Lagos, Maputo, Bangkok, Dhaka, Jakarta, Mumbai, Shanghai, Copenhagen, London, Los Angeles, New York, Buenos Aires and Santiago.”

Guterres cited data compiled by the World Meteorological Organization that shows global sea levels have risen faster, on average, since the year 1900 than in any century in the past 3,000 years. Oceans have warmed at a faster rate over the past century than at any time in the preceding 11,000 years, the WMO says.

“Our world is hurtling past the 1.5C warming limit that a livable future requires, and with present policies, is careening towards 2.8C,” Guterres said Tuesday, according to a transcript of his speech. He described a temperature change of that level as a “death sentence for vulnerable countries.”

A U.N. report [released in October](#) predicted that the world is on track to warm by 2.4 degrees Celsius (4.3 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of the century – almost a full degree higher than the 2015 Paris climate accord goal of limiting Earth’s warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 Fahrenheit) above preindustrial levels. “Even if global heating is miraculously limited to 1.5C, there will still be a sizeable sea-level rise,” Guterres said.

The U.N. head’s dire warnings come as a [new report](#) showed that the amount of floating ice around Antarctica has hit a record low – an alarming sign that global warming may be reaching even the coolest and most remote parts of the planet. (The Arctic has been [losing](#) about 20,000 square miles of ice per year since 1979.) Research out Wednesday showed how [warmer oceans are cutting into the West Antarctic’s Thwaites Glacier](#), and [another study last year](#) suggested the window for protecting the vast **East Antarctica Ice Sheet** – which is about the size of the [United States](#) – from significantly shrinking is narrowing, with troubling predictions that it **has the potential to unleash sea level rises of up to 16½ feet over the long term if greenhouse gas emissions targets aren’t met.**

“Around the world, a hotter planet is melting glaciers and ice sheets,” Guterres said Tuesday. He noted that already, melting glaciers in the Himalayas have [worsened flooding in Pakistan](#). In time, he warned, rising sea levels and the intrusion of saltwater will make large parts of huge deltas across Asia uninhabitable. “The consequences of all of this are unthinkable. Low-lying communities and entire countries could disappear forever,” Guterres said.

The number of people forcibly displaced by war, food insecurity and changing climate conditions including severe drought already topped 100 million in 2022, according to the [U.N. refugee agency](#), which is working toward a legal framework for climate refugees amid expectations their numbers will rise exponentially in coming years.

The U.N. head has been battling to keep climate change at the top of the global agenda during a time of geopolitical upheaval. Last year, he warned the world was [“sleepwalking to climate catastrophe,”](#) as the [coronavirus](#) pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine undermined [already lackluster](#) efforts to meet global and national climate commitments.