

A satellite image of Typhoon Haiyan at peak intensity, showing a well-defined eye and a dense, swirling cloud structure. The typhoon is positioned over the Philippines, with the island of Luzon visible in the upper left and the Visayas and Mindanao regions below. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image, partially obscuring the typhoon's structure.

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Human Trafficking and Climate Change

Understanding the Disastrous Relationship

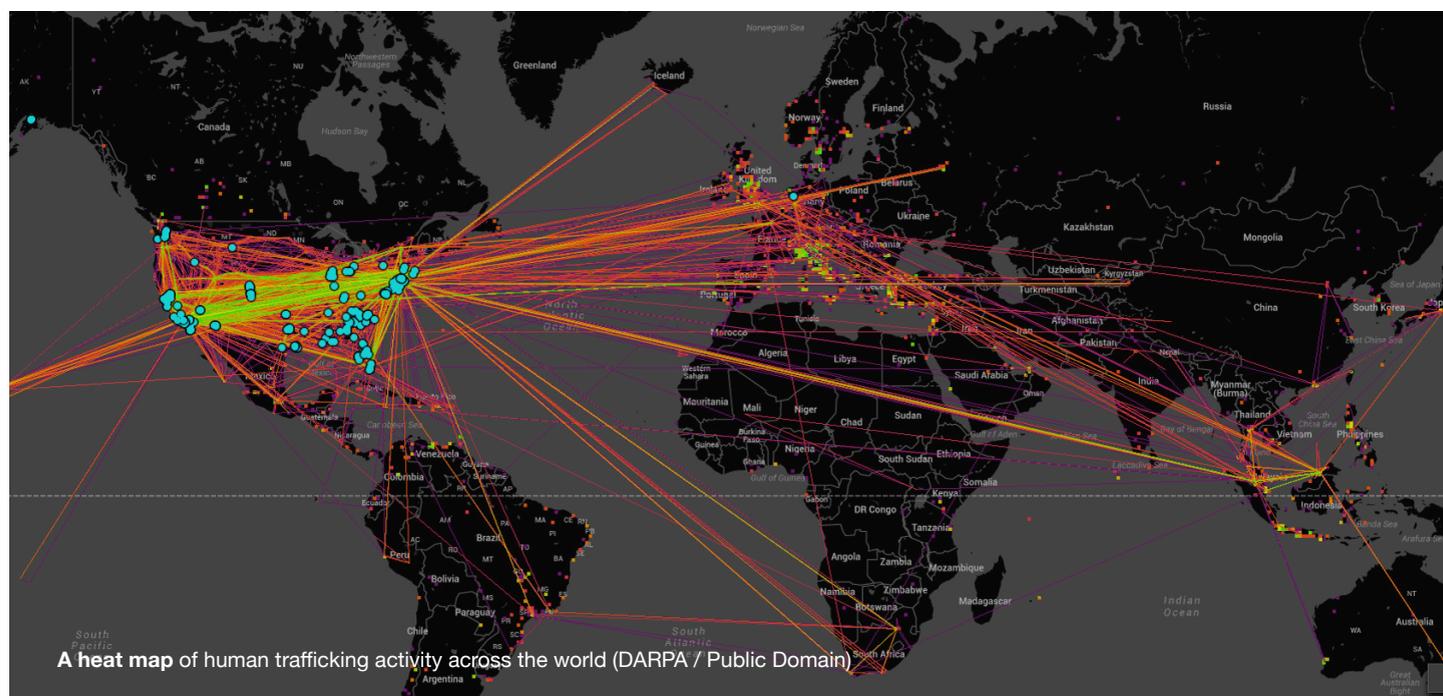
Alice C. Hill

Human trafficking is a horrendous crime: it degrades human security and undermines the rights of people around the globe. Although the exact number of victims worldwide remains elusive, the extent of human trafficking stands to increase in coming years for several reasons, including the accelerating rate of climate change. A warming world will almost certainly bring more disasters that result in greater displacement of people from their homes and livelihoods. This, in turn, puts them at greater risk of trafficking. Human trafficking is a highly lucrative crime, with few perpetrators successfully prosecuted and transnational criminal and terrorist groups repeatedly using it as a source of revenue. These factors, in combination with worsening climate change impacts will, in all likelihood, yield ever more human trafficking victims

At its core, human trafficking involves forcing another against his or her will to work, perform sex acts, or succumb to debt bondage. Despite its name, the crime does not necessarily involve movement: the key element is coercion. Over 170 nations have signaled their opposition to human trafficking by joining the United Nations

Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and virtually all countries have registered official opposition to trafficking in humans. Despite these pronouncements, human trafficking occurs with staggering frequency. While precise estimates of the number of persons trafficked are difficult to obtain, the U.S. Department of State speculated in its *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report* that there may be “tens of millions” of victims worldwide.¹ Other international organizations “estimate that about 25 million people are victims” of human trafficking in the world.² In all likelihood, those numbers will grow due in part to the increasing effects of climate change.

Climate change leads to more disasters like increased flooding from sea-level rise and extreme precipitation — as well as more intense storms, wildfires, and droughts.³ It also forces people to move. According to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, climate change impacts “almost certainly will increase the number of displaced people” and in the next 20 years could cause unprecedented patterns of global migration.⁴ Research has repeatedly shown that “disasters exacerbate the root



causes of human trafficking, including poverty and lack of viable livelihoods.”⁵ Disasters can “instantly plung[e] those without safety nets into poverty,” making them economically and emotionally vulnerable and thus potential prey for traffickers.⁶ In other words, climate change-exacerbated disasters threaten to impoverish and displace many millions of people across the globe, therefore heightening their vulnerability to trafficking.

The increase in trafficking that followed the 2010 Haiti earthquake serves as a vivid illustration of the kind of risks posed by more frequent disasters. Late in the afternoon of January 12, 2010, the ground in the Haitian capital of Santo Domingo began to shake. A 7.0 magnitude earthquake — “the worst in the region in more than 200 years” — had struck.⁷ The earthquake reportedly “displaced more than a million people, and damaged nearly half of all structures” near its epicenter, according to official estimates.⁸ Over one hundred thousand people died. Before the quake, “more than 300,000 children” in Haiti reportedly already performed forced labor.⁹ In 2012, the first year the U.S. Department of State included Haiti in its *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Haiti had as many as “500,000 *restaveks* — the term for children in forced domestic service” within its borders.¹⁰ Foreign criminals also sought to profit from the confusion post-earthquake. Ten Americans were arrested — at least one found guilty and convicted — for child trafficking in Haiti after they attempted to abduct

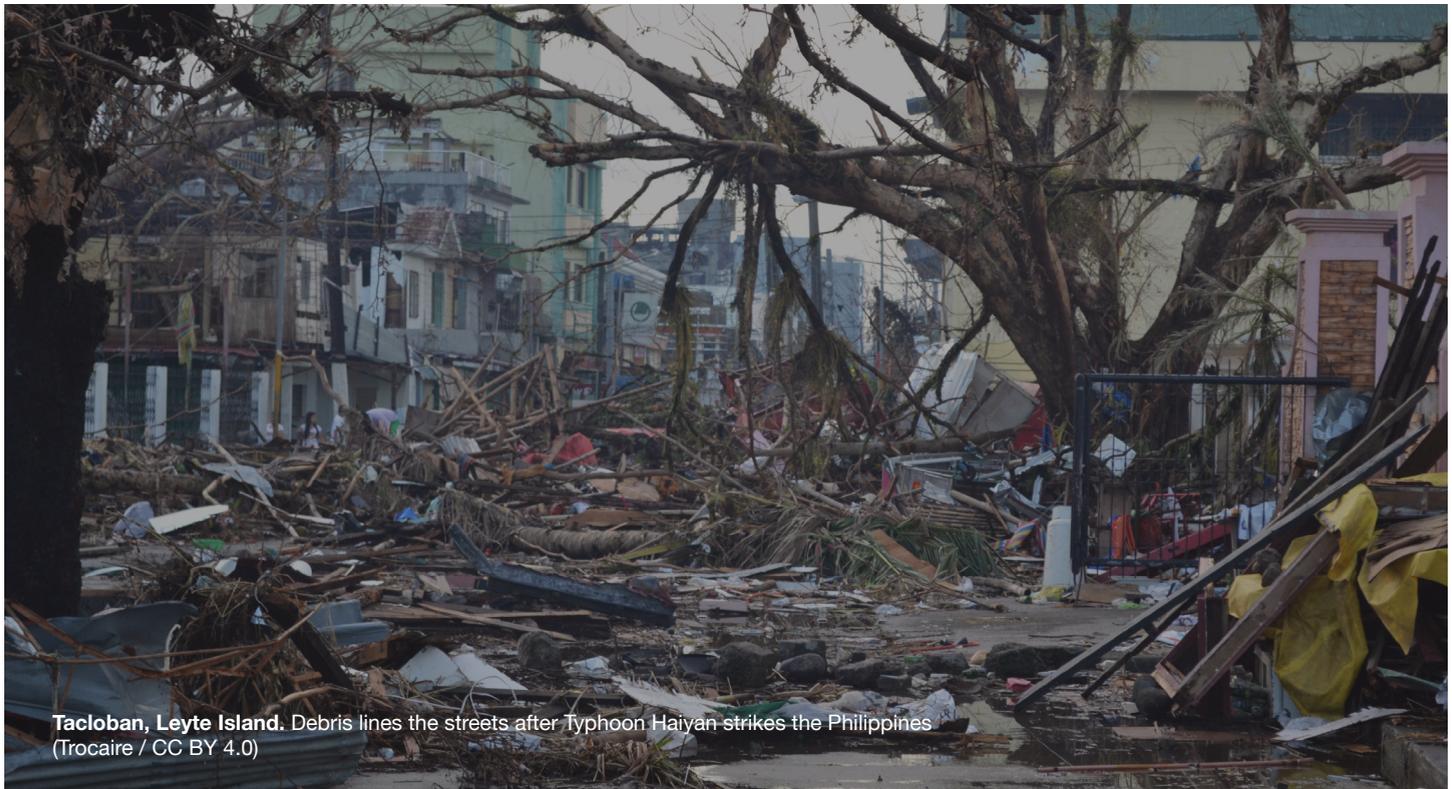
33 children under the guise of adoption.¹¹

Recent events have already provided a glimpse of what lies in store as climate change increasingly exacerbates natural disasters. In November 2013, Typhoon Haiyan, one of the strongest tropical cyclones ever recorded, slammed into the Philippines. The storm and the storm surge that accompanied it hit Tacloban City especially hard. According to the City Administrator Tecson John Lim, about 90 percent of the city was destroyed.¹² In the wake of Typhoon Haiyan’s devastation, researchers sought to determine if climate change had worsened the impact of the storm. Fifteen of 16 model simulations showed that the typhoon had strengthened as a result of climate change, and that the storm surge in Tacloban had increased by around 20 percent also due to climate change.¹³ The storm left 4 million people homeless, including Kristine (not her real name), who sought refuge in a local stadium, the Tacloban Astrodome. There, thousands of others joined her in search of shelter. Soon, “an underground economy took root” in the Tacloban Astrodome.¹⁴ Women and girls were “trafficked into forced labor and sex work by recruiters offering jobs and scholarships.”¹⁵ Kristine herself was only 13 when she was sold to men every night “for food and scarce aid supplies.”¹⁶

After the 2011 East Africa drought struck Somalia, the UN called it “the worst drought the region has expe-



A mass grave for children in Dadaab (Oxfam East Africa / CC BY 4.0)



Tacloban, Leyte Island. Debris lines the streets after Typhoon Haiyan strikes the Philippines (Trocaire / CC BY 4.0)

rienced [since] the early 1950s.”¹⁷ As with Typhoon Haiyan, some researchers believe that the drought in Somalia was worsened by climate change.¹⁸ The situation became so severe that the UN eventually declared it a famine — one of only three other official declarations issued in the 20 years before 2011 — that ended up displacing hundreds of thousands of people.¹⁹ Among those was Amina (not her real name).²⁰ Amina fled the drought-induced famine in Somalia, searching for a better life in neighboring Kenya. She put her trust in smugglers who promised to guide her safely across the border, which the Kenyan government had repeatedly closed throughout the crisis.²¹ However, the “agents” (*mukhalis* in Swahili) that smuggled her into the country ultimately sold her into the service of a shopkeeper in Eastleigh, a Somali-dominated suburb in Nairobi.

Heightened vulnerability to human trafficking after disasters raises serious concerns not only for the rising number of victims, but also for the greater opportunity for infiltration it provides transnational crime, including criminal gangs such as Los Zetas and MS-13. MS-13, a brutal international crime syndicate formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s, has a well-documented connection to human trafficking, and uses both human trafficking and human smuggling as one of their “primary money-making venture[s],” according to some research.²²

MS-13 allegedly operated nine prostitution rings in the DC-Maryland-Virginia area between 2009 and 2012, prostituting children as young as 12 years old.²³ On average, prosecutors have said that MS-13 prostitutes young girls eight to ten times per day.²⁴ The brutal Mexican cartel, Los Zetas, has also reportedly engaged in sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and human smuggling.²⁵ Between 2009 and 2012, Los Zetas allegedly kidnapped and enslaved 36 telecommunications engineers and forced them to construct a private radio network.²⁶ The U.S. government has called Los Zetas “the most technologically advanced, sophisticated, and dangerous cartel operating in Mexico.”²⁷

The involvement of transnational criminal elements extends far beyond the Western Hemisphere. Human trafficking has increased precipitously in post-Soviet states, much of which is due to “organized criminal groups.”²⁸ In fact, “[t]rafficking networks in [South-Eastern Europe] generally have a fairly well-defined organizational structure,” oftentimes relying on complex networks of criminal organizations, travel agencies, and security services to conduct their operations.²⁹ Legal documents related to 41 human smuggling and trafficking cases between 1995 and 2003 revealed that “former intelligence personnel visibly played an important role in the activities of the criminal network” in over 25 percent of



cases.³⁰ According to the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, “Transnational organized criminal groups, in addition to engaging in violence, will continue to traffic in human beings” in the future.³¹

In recent years, the problem has grown beyond transnational organized crime to include terrorist organizations. Boko Haram, a Nigerian group the U.S. Department of State designated a terrorist organization in 2013, kidnapped over 10,000 boys and trained them as child soldiers between 2013 and 2016.³² *The New York Times* reported that, during the highly publicized kidnapping of hundreds of schoolgirls in 2014, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau said he would “sell [the girls] in the market, by Allah . . . [and he would] give their hands in marriage because they are our slaves. We would marry them out at the age of nine. We would marry them out at the age of 12.”³³ More recently, the Islamic State (IS) has also engaged in large-scale human trafficking activities. The Islamic State has enslaved upwards of 5,000 women in the Middle East as of 2017, and human trafficking has long been recognized as one of the group’s “largest sources of income.”³⁴ IS principally targets Yazidi women and girls from the Nineveh Province of Iraq, generating an estimated USD 35 to USD 45 million in ransom payments for enslaved women in 2014 alone.³⁵

Among the reasons transnational criminal elements and terrorist groups resort to human trafficking is that it is a highly lucrative crime. According to a 2014 report from

the International Labour Organization (ILO), human trafficking generates approximately USD 150 billion per year, USD 99 billion of which comes from commercial sexual exploitation.³⁶ The ILO also estimated that commercial sexual exploitation generated around USD 22,000 in annual profits per person trafficked — higher than any other type of human trafficking.³⁷ Human trafficking falls just behind other types of illicit trafficking, such as trafficking in narcotics, in terms of scale. But unlike other types of trafficking, human traffickers can “reuse . . . human being[s] over and over.”³⁸ According to a 2005 report from the Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings, on average a single sex trafficker earned approximately USD 250,000 from their victims in a single year.³⁹

Human trafficking is not only a highly lucrative crime, it is also one that, despite a high suspected incidence rate, results in shockingly few successful prosecutions around the world. The U.S. Department of State’s *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report* estimates that only about 15,000 human trafficking prosecutions took place worldwide in 2016, despite law enforcement having reported over 66,000 identified victims and millions more held as modern slaves across the globe.⁴⁰ One factor contributing to the low level of prosecution is that human trafficking is a notoriously difficult crime to prosecute. A guide written for Texas prosecutors of human trafficking cases notes that the “majority of our witnesses are not very cooperative and reluctant to come

to court.”⁴¹ The victims may even run away from law enforcement.⁴² They may resist cooperating with law enforcement because they fear retribution to themselves or their families from the perpetrators. Victims may feel deep shame and guilt for allowing themselves to be trafficked or they may fear confronting their traffickers or turning on them.⁴³ In the case of child victims, perpetrators may pay off their families to ensure their silence. But without the victim’s testimony, the prosecution can lack the necessary evidence to establish the elements of the crime, including coercion. And even when victims do testify, juries and judges may struggle to understand why the victims stayed with their abusers when offered opportunities for escape or find them lacking in credibility because they engaged in criminal activity such as prostitution.⁴⁴ Given the prosecutorial challenges, it is easy to see how human trafficking can be a fairly low-risk, high-reward crime.

Government corruption further contributes to traffickers’ impunity. Both the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and the U.S. Department of State have identified corruption as an important contributing factor to human trafficking. In some countries, “law enforcement personnel ignore clear signs of exploitation or . . . facilitate human trafficking” themselves.⁴⁵ However, this corruption has not only “made trafficking possible” in some cases; it has also made it “highly profitable” in cases where law enforcement actively participates in human trafficking

activities.⁴⁶ Furthermore, research has shown that levels of corruption in a country correlate as strongly with human trafficking as do levels of poverty — the most commonly cited cause of human trafficking.⁴⁷ In fact, it is precisely those countries “that make the least effort to fight human trafficking [that] tend to be those with high levels of official corruption.”⁴⁸ Corruption erodes a country’s efforts to combat human trafficking and, in some instances, can allow transnational criminals to proceed unimpeded.

As climate change impacts accelerate, ever-increasing volumes of people will see their homes, farmland, and fisheries slip away. Many will be forced to move. These events put more and more people at risk of being trafficked, including by criminal and terrorist organizations that use their ill-gotten gains to further fuel their abhorrent activities. Trafficking in persons represents a global cruelty in and of itself and fundamentally undermines the rule of law. Little attention has been paid to the increased risk of trafficking from climate change. It is time for anti-trafficking experts — legal and human rights scholars, economists, governments, and non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations — to engage. Greater focus on the connection between trafficking and climate change, and identification of ways to mitigate the risk from climate-exacerbated disasters, including displacement, have the potential not only to help curb opportunities for transnational crime and





terrorist expansion, but also to save many from a life of slavery. In addition, progress toward implementing the following policy recommendations can help reduce people's vulnerability in the context of climate change.

Researchers in academia, government, and civil society should develop robust and scientifically-based methods for analyzing the relationship between the accelerating impacts of climate change and levels of human trafficking.

Emergency planning by government and non-governmental organizations should account for the potential of increased numbers of vulnerable people in the wake of climate-exacerbated disasters and develop specific protocols to increase protections against trafficking.

National and international anti-human trafficking organizations should continue to strengthen data collection methods, including prioritizing the collection of data regarding the incidence and nature of trafficking occurring as a result of natural disasters.

National and international anti-human trafficking organizations should specifically include future climate change impacts in risk and vulnerability assessments. National and international anti-human trafficking organizations should include the likely effects of climate change in their training and development, implementation, and monitoring of anti-human trafficking

measures. They should work with their government and civil society counterparts to identify risks from climate change that could increase vulnerability to trafficking and work to prepare populations for those risks.

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