

The World Environment Day, observed June 5, highlights a reality already shaping communities worldwide as climate change alters where people live, how they earn a living and whether they can remain in place.

Floods and storms continue to destroy homes, while droughts wipe out crops and livelihoods, forcing repeated displacement in vulnerable areas. This year's theme, "Climate Action," calls for greater urgency in addressing those impacts. The global observance is being hosted in Baku, Azerbaijan.

Those affected by climate change are not passive victims. Communities rebuild after disasters, adapt to changing conditions and seek new ways forward. But experts say resilience requires stronger systems and sustained support.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) works with governments and communities on climate-related displacement, supporting planning for climate-driven movement, helping people adapt in place and responding to emergencies. The agency also produces data and analysis to guide policy decisions on climate and migration.

Healthy ecosystems also play a key role in reducing climate risks and helping communities recover after disasters, according to environmental agencies.

In Rwanda, World Environment Day 2026 coincided with the 20th anniversary of the Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA), marked June 5 at Gikondo Wetland in Kigali.

Officials, development partners, civil society groups and community members gathered to reflect on two decades of environmental policy and restoration efforts, as well as the growing risks posed by climate change.

REMA Director General Juliet Kabera said the agency was created in 2005 as Rwanda rebuilt from the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, at a time when environmental protection was emerging as a national priority alongside development needs.



REMA Director General Juliet Kabera

Over the past 20 years, she said, REMA has led reforms including wetland mapping

and protection, the introduction of environmental impact assessments and the development of environmental laws and regulations. The agency also supported early restrictions on plastic bags.

Kabera said REMA's mandate has expanded to include climate change adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration, air quality monitoring and green growth initiatives.

She highlighted restoration projects that have contributed to the development of Gishwati-Mukura National Park, as well as the rehabilitation of degraded wetlands and landscapes across the country.

She also pointed to Nyandungu Eco-Park in Kigali as an example of ecosystem restoration, saying it now supports flood control, biodiversity conservation, recreation and environmental education.

On air quality and transport, Kabera said Rwanda has introduced monitoring systems, strengthened vehicle emission testing and supported research that helped guide incentives for electric mobility, including electric motorcycles.

Despite progress, officials warned that climate change remains a major threat.

Rwanda has experienced increasingly severe floods and landslides in recent years, including disasters in 2023 that killed more than 130 people and caused an estimated \$400 million in damage, according to government figures.

Kabera said climate projections suggest Rwanda could lose 5% to 7% of economic output by 2050 if risks are not addressed.

"The action should be now, preparing to counter that before it even reaches us," she said.

Although Rwanda contributes a small share of global emissions, it remains highly vulnerable due to its geography, population density and reliance on rain-fed agriculture.

The government's updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC 3.0) outline climate investment needs estimated at about \$12 billion, with a focus on adaptation and resilience.

Dr. Fatmata Lovetta Sesay, acting UN resident coordinator and UNDP resident representative in Rwanda, said REMA has evolved from being viewed primarily as an enforcement agency to a development partner.

“In the early years, REMA was known as the institution that came to tell people, ‘You cannot do this,’” she said. “But over time, that shifted to, ‘Let us do it this way.’”

She said the change helped integrate environmental protection into Rwanda’s development model, supported by cooperation with the United Nations system and institutions such as the Rwanda Green Fund.

Plan International Rwanda Country Director Emilie Fernandes said climate change is also a social issue that disproportionately affects children and girls by limiting access to education, health and economic opportunity.

She called for increased investment in climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy, greenhouse farming and green jobs for young people.

Minister of Environment Dr. Bernadette Arakwiye said Rwanda’s experience with initiatives such as Green Gicumbi, Green Amayaga and wetland restoration shows the value of nature-based solutions.

She also pointed to new investments in climate monitoring, including the country’s first Automatic Upper Air Station in Huye, which will improve forecasting and data collection.

“There is no better tool in our deliberate action than accurate and reliable data,” she said.

She said priorities going forward include sustainable land management, climate resilience and green urban development, adding that environmental regulations should be seen as enabling sustainable growth rather than restricting it.

As Rwanda marks 20 years of REMA, officials say progress has been significant but challenges remain.

They call for increased investment, stronger partnerships and accelerated climate action to scale up restoration and resilience efforts.

Kabera said the broader goal extends beyond environmental protection.

“We do all that we do not for the wetlands and not for the trees alone,” she said.

“We do what we do for the generations to come.”