

ISAS Brief

No. 27 – Date: 23 October 2007

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Climate Change, Conflict over Scarce Resources and the Nobel Peace Prize

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The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and former United States Vice-President, Al Gore, shared the Nobel peace prize for 2007 for “their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change”, according to the Nobel Committee’s citation.

The Nobel peace prize is normally awarded to the person or organisation that has done the most or the best work in promoting inter-state, regional or global peace. Well, how exactly are global warming and other issues pertaining to climate variability linked to global peace and conflict?

Climate change is being considered a non-traditional yet long-term security challenge. It is predicted to be a potential source of tension and conflict between ethnic groups and nations over water, land and other scarce resources. Rising global temperatures are already submerging low-lying coastal areas, shrinking arable lands, contributing to crop failures, changing the flows of water and creating thousands of environmental refugees in many parts of the world.

A series of scientific studies published by the IPCC since 1988 show that global warming is no more a scenario. If no action is taken now, climate change will have severe consequences on developed and developing countries alike. Hurricane Katrina is a reminder that even the United States, the world’s richest nation, is not immune to extreme weather. Al Gore is leading the international campaign for action against global warming through his documentary film, “An Inconvenient Truth”, and his lectures.

Human civilisation has lived through a fairly stable climate for thousands of years. However, the global climate has changed markedly since the Industrial Revolution. The Third Assessment Report of the IPCC deduces that global average surface temperature has increased by 0.6°C (±0.2°C) over the 20th century and is predicted to increase by 1.4 to 5.8°C between 1990 and 2100.

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According to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the top five warmest years since the 1890s were 2005, 1998, 2002, 2003, and 2004 respectively. The Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC reveals that global sea level rose at an average rate of 1.8 mm per year between 1961 and 2003 – the rate was faster between 1993 and 2003 at about 3.1 mm per year.

A study commissioned by the British Treasury and conducted by former World Bank Chief Economist, Sir Nicholas Stern, warns that “melting glaciers could cause water shortages for one in six of the world’s population, floods from rising sea levels could displace up to 100 million people, as high as 40 percent of wildlife species could become extinct, droughts may create tens or even hundreds of millions of “climate refugees”, if no credible action is taken.

Climate change has been blamed for the on-going humanitarian crisis in Darfur. The United Nations Environmental Program believes that there is a very strong link between land degradation, desertification and conflict in Darfur. According to the statistics provided by the United Nations, average precipitation has declined some 40 percent since the early 1980s in this region. Consequently, the dearth of water and other scarce resources have fueled ethnic strife between nomadic and pastoral communities.

The scarcity of water could create more conflicts, if not wars, among nations. When the Turkish authorities planned to build dams on the Euphrates River in 1998, it virtually brought the nation to the brink of war with Syria. The tensions between Israel, Jordan and Palestine over the Jordan River, China and India over the Brahmaputra River, India and Bangladesh over the Ganges River are few examples of the potential hotbeds of water-sharing conflicts.

The intra-state water-sharing disputes have become salient in several South and Southeast Asian countries. Things could turn much worse if anthropogenic warming wipes out large areas of glaciers across the Himalayas and the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, as predicted by the climate scientists.

The Tibetan plateau is the birth place of major rivers, including the Yangtze, the Indus, the Yellow, the Mekong, the Brahmaputra, the Salween, the Karnali and the Sutlej. These rivers feed 47 percent of world population. Beijing plans to build several dams, ignoring New Delhi’s concern and such action could divert the natural water flows of the Tibetan plateau. Sino-Indian rivalry over water could stall the Asian renaissance.

The issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh to India has become a major bone of contention between New Delhi and Dhaka, and many of these immigrants are believed to be environmental refugees. To curb illegal immigration, India has been fencing the porous Bangladesh border. Floods in the Ganges, caused by melting glaciers in the Himalayas and the changing pattern of monsoons in South Asia, displace thousands of people in Bangladesh every year.

The sea-level rise can create millions of environmental refugees across the world. In South Asia, 60 million people live in coastal flood zones. Tuvalu, a Polynesian island nation located in the Pacific Ocean, is negotiating migration rights to New Zealand as the island might be one of the

earliest victims of global warming. The Stern Report discloses that millions of semi-starving people in sub-Saharan Africa migrated to different places primarily due to environmental factors.

The food security of the net food importing countries (especially poor countries) is also affected since many staple foods and oilseeds are increasingly being channeled towards biofuel and biodiesel production. As oil prices sky rocket in the international markets, the increasing use of coal and other hydrocarbons pollute the skies and cities. The need to develop relatively less-carbon emitting fuel is one of the ways to mitigate the adverse impacts of climate change.

However, many humanitarian organisations have already warned that the biofuel craze will starve millions of people in the third world countries. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, given continued high oil prices, the rapid growth in global biofuel production will drive the corn prices up by 20 percent by 2010, the prices of oilseeds by 26 percent, wheat prices by 11 percent and cassava prices by 33 percent.

It is predicted that the poorest of the poor would be the earliest and the hardest hit by global warming. An estimated 985 million people live in extreme poverty (less than US\$1 a day) worldwide, according to the World Bank. Scarcity of water, food and arable lands might spark widespread conflicts in poor countries.

A global agreement to cut green house gas (GHG) emissions is one of the ways to mitigate the potential adverse impacts of climate change. However, the United States, the world's largest carbon dioxide (CO₂) emitter, refuses to sign the Kyoto Protocol, an international treaty designed to limit global GHG. China, which may overtake the United States as the world's top emitter of GHG by 2007, is not willing to take the risk of slowing its economic growth by curbing GHG. India, currently ranked 5th amongst CO₂ emitters in the world, is also not subject to binding constraints on GHG.

If the global community does not act, the overall risks of climate change would be equivalent to losing at least five percent of global gross domestic products (GDP) each year, now and forever and if we count the total cost it could shrink the global GDP 20 percent or more, the Stern Report warns.

Considering the current geo-politics over the climate change debate, mass awareness is needed to persuade the White House and other big emitters to return to the climate deal table. In this regard, the Nobel peace prize of 2007 is a timely recognition of the works of IPCC and Al Gore's fight against the climate crisis. A global consensus on global warming is a prerequisite to protect the world's future climate and, thereby, reducing the threat to the security of humankind.

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