

Security Risks of Environment Crisis

THALIF DEEN

The world's growing environmental crisis—including Climate Change, which has resulted in widespread droughts, floods and heatwaves threatening major food crops—is escalating security risks worldwide.

A new policy report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), titled *'Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk'*, points out that between 2010 and 2020 the number of State-based armed conflicts roughly doubled (to 56), as did the number of conflict deaths. At the same time, the number of refugees and other forcibly displaced people also doubled, to 82.4 million.

In 2020, the number of operationally deployed nuclear warheads increased after years of reductions, and in 2021, military spending surpassed US\$ 2 trillion for the first time ever.

The last decade has been marked by increasingly tense geopolitics, with disputes simmering and sometimes erupting between major states and blocs, and populism on the rise. The report argues that cooperation is essential for managing the environmental and security crises, along with the risks they create.

The report illustrates some of the complex ways these crises are starting to interact around the world:

■ In Somalia, where prolonged drought and other Climate Change impacts, combined with poverty, lack of preparedness and weak govern-

ment, have driven people into the arms of the extremist group al-Shabab.

■ Across the Sahel, where drought and the expansion of farmland to feed a growing population are pushing farmers and nomadic herders into competition over access to resources such as land and water, and this competition often turns violent.

■ In Central America, where the impact of Climate Change on crops combined with violence and corruption increased the number of people attempting to migrate to the securitized US border

■ And in the Middle East and North Africa, where in the early 2010s, the failure of the Russian grain harvest due to a Climate Change-linked heatwave combined with the impacts of a US biofuels policy to raise the price of bread, exacerbating tensions that led to the Arab Spring series of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa.

These examples show clearly that it's much more complex than environmental degradation leading to conflict," said Environment of Peace expert panellist Chibeze Ezekiel, Coordinator of the Strategic Youth Network for Development in Ghana.

Renewable energy policy

"At the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, a Climate Change impact in one continent and a well-intentioned renewable energy policy in another combined with existing unrest in a third to increase the risks of conflict—nobody had seen that combination coming."

"Our new report for policymakers goes beyond simply showing that environmental change can increase risks to peace and security. That's established," said SIPRI Director and Environment of Peace author Dan Smith. "What our research reveals is the complexity and breadth of that relationship, the many forms it can take. And most of all, we show what can be done about it; how we can deliver peace and security in a new era of risk."

More than 30 researchers from SIPRI and other institutions contributed to the report, guided by a panel of international experts on environment and security led by Margot Wallstrom, the former Swedish Foreign Minister and European Commissioner for the Environment.

Asked if the UN can play a role to help resolve these ongoing crises, Smith, one of the main authors of the report, told IDN environmental, health and security crises intersect at multiple local, national, regional and global levels.

"None of the issues can be addressed by any actor going it alone," he said.

Working together, communities, states and regional organisations can all do something to address these linked crises if they develop the knowledge and the instruments and resource the work properly, he pointed out.

"To tie it all together and get cooperation going at full speed, there is no alternative to a well function United Nations. Achieving that is a top priority," said Smith.

Jen Maman, Senior Peace Adviser

at Greenpeace International told IDN this is a timely report that serves as a striking reminder of the fact that there can be no peace without green. The intimate, symbiotic relationships, illustrated in the report, between peace and the environment must be cherished and acted upon.

"We must choose equity and sustainability over greed, human dignity and courage over exploitation. A healthy environment is key to human security. Caring for the environment is a necessity not a luxury. Our fates and that of the natural world are intimately connected. We humans cannot survive, nor live peacefully, without a healthy, functioning environment," she added.

She pointed out the report is coming out at a critical point in human history, when it is clearer than ever—that fossil fuel companies are fuelling the climate crisis and wars around the world at the cost and suffering of the most vulnerable. All around the world, fossil fuels are at the root of Climate Change, toxic pollution, corruption, and conflict.

"The war in Ukraine is another jarring reminder of how critical it is that world leaders get serious about breaking our ties to fossil fuels and build a safe, secure renewable energy system for all. The report demonstrates the impetus for a rapid renewable energy transition away from fossil fuels, which are driving the world deeper into the climate crisis and conflict. Critically—it also makes the case for this transition to be equitable, just and sustainable—centering on the needs of the world's most vulnerable populations," she added.

She also said the report makes a case for world leaders to come together in the understanding that no one is safe until everyone is safe, that we are part of nature not apart from it. Now is the time for visionary leadership that heralds a 21st Century dominated by collaboration not conflict. The 21st Century's struggles for a livable world cannot be solved by 20th Century military manoeuvres.

"The whole notion of security as traditionally understood—in terms of political and military threats to national sovereignty—must be expanded to include the growing impacts of environmental stress—locally, nationally, regionally, and globally."

"A comprehensive approach to international and national security must transcend the traditional emphasis on military power and armed competition," she declared.



Floods in Colombo

Helen Clark, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand and a member of the Environment of Peace advisory panel, said: "No government can secure the well-being of its citizens against the escalating global crises without international cooperation. We must urgently find ways to cooperate on addressing common environment-related security threats, even in today's toxic geopolitical landscape. Against global threats, cooperation is self-interest. In fact, cooperation is the new realism."

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the gains countries make by preparing for an event whose potential for devastation is clear even if its timing and nature may not be, according to the study.

For example, by applying lessons from the 2002 SARS outbreak, South Korea managed to keep its COVID-19 mortality rate down to around 10% of that of countries with comparable populations in the first two years of the pandemic.

This not only saved lives but also allowed South Korea to avoid much of the destabilizing economic and social impact felt in other countries that chose not to prepare despite regular warnings of pandemic risks from bodies such as the World Health Organisation.

"The pandemic shows us clearly the risks we run when we choose not to prepare," said Margot Wallstrom. "As the environmental and security crises get worse, governments need to assess what risks lie ahead, to develop the capacity to deal with them, and to make societies more resilient. The poorest countries will need international support to do this, and they should receive it."

The report recommends that environmental stressors should be included in early-warning systems for conflict risk, and urges that treaties on sharing resources such as fisheries, water and forests should be updated

to make them fit for purpose in this new era of complex risks.

Global demand for resources

Elaborating further, Maman of Greenpeace International said: "The report presents a bleak picture, but also—some reasons for hope. As the global population continues to rise, the global demand for resources continues to grow, and the impacts of Climate Change begin to materialize, competition over natural resources is set to intensify. Productive land, water, food and energy are all increasingly scarce."

As scarcity increases and more planetary boundaries are crossed, conflict becomes both more frequent, more likely and more protracted in more places. Conflict can be both a symptom of resource scarcity as well as a root cause for why we are unable to secure environmental protections, basic rights and equality in countries.

The good news, illustrated by the report, is that resource scarcity can also be the impetus for cooperation, coordination, and negotiation, an opportunity to summon human ingenuity and generosity.

The global shock to oil and gas prices and the choice between dictators and the toxic and anti-democratic companies who peddle them present us with a crossroads:

we can move away from fossil fuels altogether and towards bold, peaceful, people-centred public policies to drastically reduce carbon emissions, transition in a just way out of a fossil-fuel based economy and prevent further harm;

or the world can listen to the fossil fuel hawks who want to drill more and more, locking in dependence on fossil fuels for many more years and doing nothing to free us from the cycle of conflicts and climate destruction," she declared.

- [IDN-InDepthNews]



Intense droughts threaten crops, wildlife and freshwater supplies.