

Forest Fires Wreak Wide Havoc

HUGE fires burning on three of Indonesia's biggest islands have created a smoke haze over Southeast Asia, disrupted communications, caused planes to crash and ships to collide and led to health problems.

The biggest conflagration — and the main one still out of control — is on Borneo, the largest, remotest and most heavily forested island in the archipelago. It has raged for months far from inhabited areas and is reachable only by helicopter.

The worst drought for 30 years is believed responsible for the blaze. The rains in Indonesia normally start in September. This year they did not begin until November. Dead wood or surface coal deposits may have ignited in the forest heat.

Some Indonesian officials fear the fire could turn out to be just as devastating as one that raged through Borneo in 1982-3. That was the biggest the world has ever seen and destroyed about three and a half million hectares. Its charred devastation is still visible today. In the current fire, about 100,000 hectares are believed lost so far.

On other islands, particularly Sumatra and Java, the fires — now reported out of control — are thought to be man-made. Satellite photographs show jungle clearance by logging companies, plantations and timber estates to be blame. Eighty-five fires have also been reported this year on South Sulawesi, the east of Borneo.

South Sumatra's Forestry Ministry chief blames private companies. A senior military man, Brigadier General Theo Syafet, has also dismissed ideas that nomadic slash-and-burn farmers to blame.

An international argument started when Malaysia's prickly Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammed, ever sensitive to criticism of his country's environmental policies, attacked Western nations. He accused the West of being quick to threaten timber boycotts while doing nothing to help fight the fires. The Indonesian Foreign Minister agreed.

Paulus Winarso, chief Indonesian government meteorologist, insisted there was no choice but to let nature take its course and wait for the rains. "The most we can do,"

Forest fires raging throughout Indonesia have caused chaos in several countries of Southeast Asia. They have also unleashed a fierce debate, with Indonesian and Malaysian politicians accusing industrialised countries of not matching rhetoric with deeds in trying to save the world's tropical forests. Jakarta, reports Gemini News Service, has also faced internal criticism for not foreseeing the fires and getting them put out at an early stage. By Stephen Carr

he said, "is seed clouds in the hope that this will bring rain faster."

Cloud seeding normally takes place between dry and rainy seasons, but attempts above a West Javan reservoir were interrupted this year because the atmosphere was judged not humid enough.

Of Indonesia's neighbours, Malaysia and Singapore have been most affected by the fires. Smoke blanketed Singapore, most of Malaysia's towns and some communities in southern Thailand, as well as Brunei. Malaysia called an emergency meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and suggested the fires be water-bombed from the air.

Several Malaysian hospitals reported increased respiratory and eye problems. Malaysian health officials warned the very old and young, and people with breathing difficulties, to stay indoors.

The fires are thought to have caused scores of boat collisions. In mid-October, two freighters collided off South Sumatra in thick smoke. Another time a ship hit a tug. Smoke also disrupted shipping in the Malacca Straits, the world's busiest waterway.

Malaysia's main port in Selangor state was stopped. Visibility was reduced to half a nautical mile and pilots using radar towed several ships into port.

The fires have had a devastating effect on aviation. At least two planes have crashed — one with 16 passengers and two crew over Central Borneo, another in West Kalimantan, Borneo, killing one person and injuring eight. Hundreds of flights have been cancelled.

Indonesian non-governmental organisations have criticised their government for not responding to the fires, which occur every dry season. Hadi Pramono, spokesman for Indonesian Friends of the Earth, said the authorities could learn from slash-and-burn farmers' expertise in isolating fires. Instead, they complain about inadequate equipment and lack of funds.

Another group, the Indonesian Forest Conservation Network, faults authorities for having no early warning system. Both groups want the government to collect "fire fees" from holders of forest concessions.

They leave 35 to 40 per cent of the wood they cut lying in the forest," said Pramono. "It can easily catch fire."

Meanwhile, overseas help has arrived. A team from Australia which studied several deliberately started fires in Borneo has urged that timber waste be stacked and dried before being burned.

Advisers said less smoke would accumulate if smaller fires were lit over a longer period. Coal seams be buried to deprive them of the oxygen that feeds fires. Better training of firefighters, public education campaigns and more rapid and efficient suppression of unplanned fires are recommended.

Britain offered radio equipment and a resident expert in Jakarta. Canada sent forest fire experts to identify the type of help needed to put out the Borneo blazes. They agreed to send equipment. New Zealand, Japan and the United States also offered help.

Indonesia wants more water bomber planes from donors. At present, one official said, it only has two, although forests make up 70 per cent of the country's land mass.

When the rains finally came in November, the smoke cleared. The Bornean fires continued, but blazes in Sumatra and Java were reported out or under control. Singaporean eyes no longer smarted and car headlights did not cut through unnaturally slow afternoon traffic. Mahathir Mohammed remained silent.

Sustina Wartaputra, the Indonesian Director-General of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation, announced a plan. He said that the next dry season would see better co-ordination between the Forestry Ministry, other government institutions, the private sector and nomadic farmers.

This year's disaster, he said, was caused by the drought combined with land clearance by the various groups for plantations, transmigrating sites and slash-and-burn plots. Next year, he declared, would be different. — GEMINI NEWS.

Asia's String of Calamities Remains Unbroken

The Philippine flood was the latest in a string of calamities in Asia in the summer of 1991: floods in Myanmar, severe storms in China and Bangladesh's worst cyclone

The flashfloods which claimed more than 8,000 lives in eastern Philippines was its worst ever natural disaster.

But it was by no means the first of a string of calamities — in the Philippines and in Asia. And because the region has half the world population — most of them in poverty in developing countries — it is also more prone to the aftermath of disasters.

The Philippine flood was the latest in a string of calamities in Asia in the summer of 1991: floods in Myanmar (Burma), severe storms which battered China and Bangladesh's worst cyclone.

It was the second worst flood to hit Myanmar in 100 years, next only to the 1974 flood. This year's flood damaged crops in over 260,000 acres, flooding nearly 350,000 acres of cropland and affecting over 350,000 people.

Continuous rains in June and July brought China's biggest flood in decades. It flooded 13 million hectares of farmland, destroyed over 6 million houses and killed 2,295 people in eastern China.

In Anhui province, the worst hit, two-thirds of 7.68 million hectares of farmland and 1.6 million houses were flooded. More than 3 million people were left homeless.

In 1990 torrential rains and violent storms affected 20 million people in China's Hunan province. And in 1989, 80 million people in southern China were affected by typhoons, floods and landslides.

In April, Bangladesh was hit by the strongest cyclone (225 kph) in its history. Total damage: US \$1.4 billion. Lives lost: 138,868.

On midnight of April 30, the cyclone crossed land near the port city of Chittagong. As in the Philippines, a very high tide (up to 6 metres) coincided with the storm. The

storm and tidal surge devastated a wide region of coastal Bangladesh and several islands barely one metre above sea level.

Strong as it was, it was by no means the worst in Bangladesh. In 1970 a cyclone there claimed at least 500,000 lives. Its force, and the resulting famine and disease, may have claimed one million lives.

Typhoons in Southeast Asia during 1961-70 cost US \$10,000 million in damages. This is US \$500 million more than the total assistance provided by the International Bank for Rural Reconstruction and Development during the same period.

According to the World Bank, disasters worldwide cost US \$40,000 million in physical damages each year. The costs in terms of fatalities and long-term impacts are harder to measure. The 1970 cyclone which hit Bangladesh also drowned 60 per cent of its fishermen. The latest flash-flood to hit the Philippines also claimed many fishermen.

The April cyclone which hit Bangladesh wholly damaged 44,128 acres of crops and totally damaged 521,365 houses while about 900,000 heads of livestock were lost. This list does not include damages to major economic centres, the worst affected of which was Chittagong City, port and industrial area followed by the shrimp and salt industries of Cox's Bazar district.

Without taking into account the loss of aircraft and sea vessels, the total loss sustained by Chittagong City and its industrial complex was put at US \$275 million. Restoration and rehabilitation needs for the entire country are estimated by the Asian Development Bank at US \$745 million.

Already, the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has signed with Bangladesh a US \$15.4 million loan agreement that will assist some 69,000 farmers and fishermen on the islands and coastal regions of Chittagong-Cox's Bazar area. The US \$20.7 million special assistance project is supported with grants from the Danish International Development Agency, the European Community and the Bangladesh government.

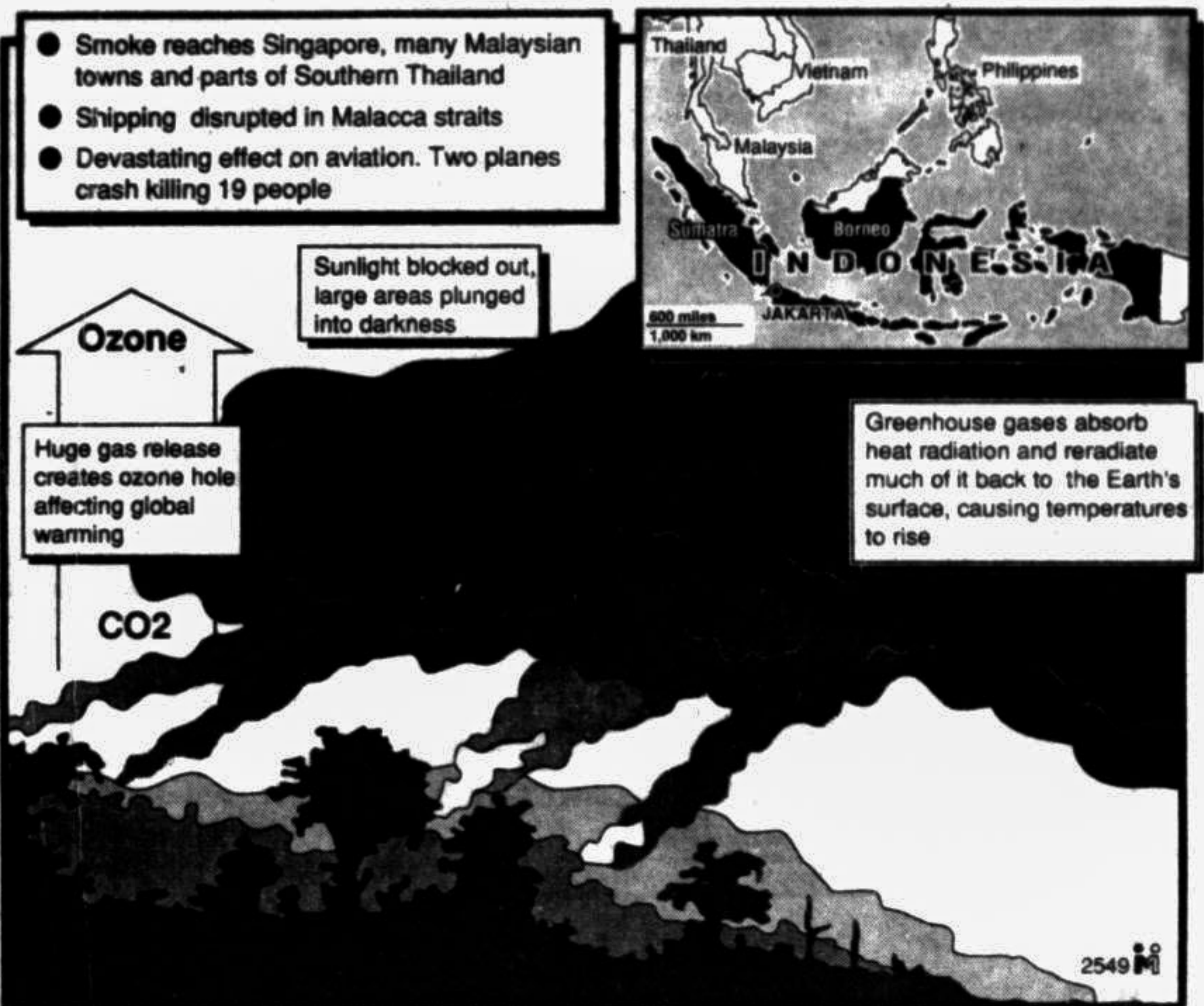
The first step is to ensure that crops, livestock, tools, boats and fishing gear are replaced. Poor farmers will be given, free of cost, enough seeds and other inputs to see them through a year's crop cycle. Through loans and grants, they will be able to purchase tools, poultry and livestock and to gain the use of power tillers.

A similar system will permit small-scale fishermen to replace lost craft and gear, repair that which can be salvaged and reclaim ruined freshwater fishponds. Many of the poorest households are landless, most of them headed by women. They will receive credit and grants to start up their farm-related enterprises gain or set up new ones.

Disaster prevention — not only rehabilitation — is a major component of the project. It will work to replace and improve early warning systems, build cyclone shelters for people and livestock and to replant coastal mangrove forests and windbreak stands of trees around houses and fields.

Even more vital is the strengthening of local village self-help institutions. A major feature of the project is the formation and support of Village Development Committees, responsible for activities like rebuilding roads, small bridges and fishponds, planting trees and maintaining shelters.

— Depthnews



An Ecological Plan for the Year 2,000

In order to take up the challenge brought about by our delay in environmental matters, makeshift ecological measures must be finished with. Minister Brice Lalonde has declared in 1989. Hence the launching of a vast "National Plan" whose strategy is all-embracing. Its purpose is to align France on her "greenest" European neighbours.

This plan follows three major directions: a considerable broadening of ambitions, an increase in means, and a change in methods. Its promoters consider that "It makes it possible to master future growth and to anchor the environment in the culture of institutions, firms and citizens". In order to improve the living conditions of the French, all the harmful effects which damage their environment have to be dealt with simultaneously. The Green Plan thus has a number of objectives.

These are to stop the production and use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) which attack the ozone layer, within ten years; to stabilise emissions of carbon dioxide gas, responsible for the greenhouse effect, and reduce emissions of sulphur dioxide causing acid rain, by the year 2,005; to increase the level of depollution of domestic waste water from one third to two thirds in ten years; to reduce pollution due to agriculture (fertilisers, pesticides, insecticides); to eliminate the 6,000 unofficial rubbish dumps in France and to reduce the amount of sewage released in the sea by 50%; to create a thousand official waste deposit centres and recycle 15% of town waste and 50% of industrial residue (compared with 30% today); to insulate the 200,000 homes which still suffer from unbearable noise levels, within ten years; and to double the number of homes linked up to a sewage-works.

Carrying out such a programme will be the work of a full ministry, a position Brice Lalonde is hoping to obtain. It will work thanks to a body of "Environment inspectors" and will see its staffing levels triple. From a thousand civil servants in the department of the environment today, in ten years there will be three thousand.

The new ministry will be entirely responsible for water management and nuclear safety, which, in the past, it shared with other institutions. At the core of the ecology machine, a French Institute for the Environment (which is to be created will be backed by organise research and control the implementation of the measures decided upon. This institute will be backed by regional and departmental directors who will, in particular, be in charge of listed installations, nuclear safety and public enquiries concerning the infrastructures. It will also serve as a relay for the European Agency for the Environment for better coordination of strategies.

Other means that the Ministry will have at its disposal thanks to the "Green Plan" are a "nature police", an extension of the "polluter-payer" principle to waste, noise, nitrates and all forms of pollution (for water, this measure will make it possible to share out costs more fairly by including farmers among polluter-payers); and the creation of new natural parks and an increase in the number of nature reserves in order to "put an end to the disorder which has appeared in the landscape".

In the Philippines, a micro-credit project was launched in 1988 through an US \$

Region's Rural Women Rated Good Credit Risks

KUALA LUMPUR — Santamaya in Nepal. The Self-Employment Loan Assistance programme in the Philippines. And many others in between.

They form the hundreds of thousands of poor women who have proven that, in the hands of a woman, even a tiny loan can make an enormous difference in the well-being of a family. They also prove that women are good credit risks.

But there are also lot more women, especially in Asia, who continue to be denied financial supports, forced to borrow from money lenders with exorbitant interest rates that drive them deeper into debt.

Not Santamaya, a mother in a village north of Kathmandu Nepal's capital. She has two children and was left nothing after her husband deserted the family.

She obtained a US \$ 74 loan, not much to speak of but enough to buy a beehive and a carpet loom. The determined mother sold honey and carpets to provide her family with food and shelter. She also repaid the loan and even started a savings account.

In the Philippines, a micro-credit project was launched in 1988 through an US \$

8 million loan from the Asian Development Bank to support the Self-Employment Loan Assistance Programme of the Department of Trade and Industry.

Poverty reduction in rural areas is the long term goal of the project. Credit was extended through non-government organisations (NGOs). By May 1991, US \$ 7 million

Along with credit, women must also be trained for better livelihood. Rural women should also have access to and control over land. by R. Meena

in loans were directed through 159 NGOs for lending to about 15,640 small enterprises and 320 self-help groups.

The average loan ranged from US \$ 395 to US \$ 539, with loan maturities from one month up to two years. Interest rates and fees between 12 and 25 per cent were charged by the NGOs.

The repayment rate is an impressive 90-95 per cent. About 61 per cent of beneficiaries are women, most of whom were of the "non-bank-

able" type. That is, their businesses were small (mostly operated at home), had limited assets and were poor.

Nepal's Santamaya and self-employment in the Philippines — they were among the many case studies on women presented during the regional conference on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women in Asia and the Pacific organ-

ised by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

Delegates agreed that training must go along with credit facilities for poor rural women to wrench themselves free from the dark shadows of poverty. They felt that training must be provided from the start of the loan so that women can enter better income-earning endeavours.

One recommendation called for an evaluation and possible replication of women's credit and savings

system — for instance, channelling credit through both formal (ex. banks) and informal (ex. NGOs) institutions and groups.

The conference recommended that land tenure systems, land reform and land use be studied in detail before designing programmes to ensure that poor rural women have access to and control over land. Distribution schemes of public lands should give priority to women and women's groups who have been using the land.

The conference also called on governments to legislate a code which ensures that both men and women have equal inheritance rights. It exhorted governments to change laws which perpetuate women's subordinate roles. Women employment at all levels with equal pay for equal work should also be encouraged.

The conference also called on IFAD to allocate 30 per cent of its loans and technical assistance to women. It recommended the setting up of a US \$ 25 million Action Fund for Rural Women.

A Rome-based UN agency, IFAD's mandate is to alleviate rural poverty and improve nutrition and food security by helping rural populations take

the initiative in raising themselves from poverty.

Since it was established in 1978, IFAD had financed 299 projects at a cost of over US \$ 12 billion. Nearly US \$ 2 out of every US \$ 5 provided by IFAD have been invested in 31 projects in 16 Asian countries.

As part of its initiatives to advance poor rural women, IFAD has held a series of four regional consultations. The first was held in Cyprus for countries in the Near East and English-speaking Africa, the second in Costa Rica for Latin America and the third in Senegal for French-speaking Africa. The fourth, here in Kuala Lumpur, was held late September.

In November, a high-level group of women-in-development experts, NGO representatives and international development agencies will meet in Rome to consolidate the findings of the four regional consultations. They will draft a Declaration And Guidelines for Action.

This, in turn, will be submitted to a Women's Summit scheduled for Feb 25. The summit is being initiated by a number of concerned First Ladies from around the world.

Tobacco-Free Society Prescribed for India

A tobacco-free society for India is easily lost in a haze of smoke. From beedis to filter-tipped cigarettes, India smokes a lot.

Now comes the Ministry of Health and other public health authorities who have launched a campaign to promote a tobacco-free society.

The plan, discussed at length by health authorities, suggests attacking the very roots of the tobacco industry. It calls for finding substitute crops for tobacco farmers, rehabilitating workers employed in the industry (including distributors and retailers who will have to find other jobs) and imposing a ban on all advertising of tobacco products.

The action to phase out the use of tobacco in India was recommended by the National Conference on Tobacco held recently at the All-Indian Institute of Medical Sciences here.

programme of phasing tobacco out.

But the Health and family Welfare Minister, M. L. Fotedar, has said the government intended to take an early decision on the proposals made by the National Conference on Tobacco and introduce appropriate legislation to restrict tobacco use.

Many medical experts doubt whether a government move to ban advertising of cigarettes will be anything more than a cosmetic exercise. For, the government has done nothing to curb the proliferation and the toxic content of tobacco products.

Despite its avowed goal of promoting health, the government significantly retains interest in the tobacco industry. Not only has it invested a staggering 47,950 million rupees (US\$1,844 million) in the industry but the amount spent on tobacco research is 30 times more than that de-

voted to spreading public awareness on the hazards of tobacco use.

Studies have also shown that the tar and nicotine contents of Indian cigarettes and beedis (strong, local cigarettes wrapped in leaves preferred by most Indians) are almost double that found in the West. India's tobacco industry employs some 30 million people in its factories and on the fields. The industry revenue yields 20,000 million rupees (US\$769 million) a year in terms of excise duty alone. It is the second largest contributor to the national revenue after the petroleum industry.

India is also a supplier of raw tobacco leaf to cigarette factories all over the world. Tobacco exports will likely reach 3,000 million rupees (US\$115 million) in 1991-92. Cigarette exports also account for about 500 million rupees (US\$19 million) a year. Understandably, there is a strong pro-tobacco lobby in India. And many groups representing tobacco farmers, cigarette companies and dealers strongly oppose the anti-tobacco moves. The industry maintains that a cause-and-effect relationship between tobacco and diseases has not been established.

More to the point, the industry insists that there are strong economic reasons why tobacco cannot be banned — it employs around 30 million people and earns 40,000 million rupees (US\$1,538 million) in exports.

Mr Fotedar, the health minister, recognises that tobacco cultivation and its industrial processing provide jobs to millions of Indians. "But the ultimate goal of a tobacco-free society is not negotiable," he says.

As a first step, a ban on advertising of cigarettes and other tobacco products in the print media is likely to be is-

sued by the government. Newspapers and magazines stand to lose about 10,000 million rupees (US\$385 million) in annual advertising revenues.

According to the independent Operations Research Group, the budget for cigarette advertising has gone up almost four times in the last five years. In newspapers and magazines, it jumped from 25.9 million rupees in (US \$ 1 million) in 1986 to 97 million rupees (US \$ 3.7 million) in 1990.

The health minister admits that a statutory warning that smoking is harmful to health

carried on cigarette packs has made no impact. "We are now exploring the possibility of introducing another strategy which could have a greater impact," says Health Minister Fotedar who has himself given up smoking.

Perhaps the introduction of slogans like "Smoking leads to cancer," "Smoking leads to heart ailments," or "For the sake of the family, stop smoking" could be of greater help. Such slogans will have to be displayed on cigarette cartons as conspicuously as the brand name itself.

The National Conference on Tobacco also asked the government to ban the sponsorship by the tobacco industry of sports and cultural events. Most of the cricket and tennis tournaments in the country are sponsored by well-known cigarette manufacturers.

The conference urged the government to establish a

National Anti-Tobacco Commission which will frame legislation and coordinate the anti-tobacco campaign. It said tax revenue from tobacco products should be used by the National Anti-Tobacco Commission for health education and research.

Dr K. S. Reddy, a senior cardiologist at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences, notes that the tobacco industry has standard responses all over the world about the hazards of tobacco use.

But medical authorities, including the World Health Organisation (WHO), say that in countries where smoking is widespread, it is responsible for 80-90 per cent of lung cancer deaths and 40 per cent of bladder cancer deaths.

According to the WHO's Dr Kenneth Stanley, oral cancer is a major problem in South Asia where tobacco chewing with betel nut is popular. About 90 per cent of all oral cancers in South Asia could be attributed to tobacco use.