

IN 1988, authorities in this city's Klong Toey port discovered abandoned barrels of toxic substances.

Although most of the barrels were traced to unknown shippers from Singapore, other barrels reportedly came from the United States, Japan, Germany and Taiwan.

The barrels were falsely labelled, registered with fake shippers' and receivers' names and simply abandoned until someone stumbled upon them, virtually chemical time bombs ticking away.

The shipping companies maintained that they were not the owners of the toxic cargoes.

But the incident brought home the point that too often toxic substances are dumped on unsuspecting countries, leaving pollution and potential death.

Bangkok is no exception. According to the Third World Network, toxic waste dumping is spreading in Southeast Asia and sowing death and diseases among people and the environment.

A Penang-based environ-

Toxic Wastes Dumped in Southeast Asia

In Thailand, barrels of toxic substances have been found abandoned in Bangkok port. Mine tailings are spreading pollution and diseases in the Philippines

ment group, the Third World Network (TWN) says toxic waste dumping has been documented in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The TWN reports that residents of Bukit Merah in Perak state, Malaysia, blame radioactive waste coming from a factory one kilometre away for ill-health, still-born babies and the miscarriages in apparently healthy women. A number of children were found with high levels of lead in their blood toxic enough to cause brain damage.

Of 108 child-bearing women under 30 years of age, 15 were found suffering unexplained foetal deaths in a four-year period between 1982 and

1986. Dr T Jeyabalan, a general practitioner, told a court hearing evidence against the factory, located one kilometre away from Bukit Merah village.

The company, operating since 1982, processes monazite from tin tailings. One of its waste products is toxic, called thorium hydroxide.

In Indonesia, pollution-related diseases have been detected in an area bordering Jakarta Bay. Child and infant deaths from convulsions are fairly common. Aside from miscarriages, a number of people developed cancer or showed mercury poisoning.

Some had physical and mental retardation, congenital birth defects, cleft palates, paralysis,

respiratory problems, brittle bones and other deformities.

Jakarta Bay is heavily polluted. Tons of industrial wastes are dumped by some 30,000 small businesses into the streams and rivers that flow into the bay.

Samples of fish, clams and shrimps showed high levels of mercury. Other heavy metals, like lead and cadmium, were also found.

The Marcopper Mining Corporation in central Philippines allegedly discharges its copper tailings into an open bay, polluting the fishing ground and reducing fishermen's catch by 90 per cent.

The tailings are quickly spreading over the seabed and

now cover an area five kilometres long and one-half kilometre wide," says the Third World Network report. This resulted in coral reefs being buried, the seawater poisoned and the fish either killed or driven away.

The report adds: "Residents from nearby towns have not been spared the ill-effects caused by the tailings which have formed a desert in the bay. During the dry season, strong winds carry fine tailing particles inland which destroy agricultural land, plant life and contaminate water supplies."

"Medical records show high incidence of respiratory, stomach and skin disorders among coastal residents compared with those in towns further inland," the report continues. Interviews by the Asia-Pacific People's Environment Network also noted abdominal pains, diarrhoea, and food poisoning symptoms among local residents after eating fish and shellfish caught in the bay, it was also reported.

— Depthnews.

AT the beginning of the century the forests of Côte D'Ivoire covered 14 million hectares, compared with the eight million hectares of forest in France. Today, as a result of reforestation and careful management, France has 14 million hectares of forest while in Côte D'Ivoire, the forest has shrunk to fewer than three million.

That is just one example of the growing problem of deforestation which sees tropical rainforests disappearing at a rate of 142,000 square kilometres a year, and it is an issue which is on the agenda at the Tenth World Forestry Congress in Paris.

The Congress, with a theme "Forests, a Heritage for the Future," will be attended by 3,000 experts from 160 countries and 100 international organisations specialising in forestry.

But some environmentalists fear the Paris gathering will not seriously address the problem. "The FAO strategy on these issues is a lot of rhetoric about saving the rainforest, but in fact doing everything they can to open it up to commercial concerns," says Nicholas Hilliard of The Ecologist magazine.

Since 1985, the FAO and World Bank have been promoting a worldwide programme called the Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP), which critics claim has actually promoted commercial logging.

Marcus Colchester, of the World Rainforest Movement, says: "We have a number of major concerns with regard to the TFAP and we're very disappointed with progress on dealing with the forestry issue."

The TFAP promotes expansion of commercial forestry without paying attention to people and the root causes of deforestation."

The World Rainforest Movement and several other groups, acting under the umbrella of an organisation called Europa, will stage a press conference in Paris on September 17, the day the Forestry Congress opens.

"We've got a rather critical message to put across," said Colchester. "One of the main causes of forest loss is landless people moving into forests, so we should pay more attention to taking care of rural people outside the forests."

Tropical forest logging has often earned itself a bad name as it is considered largely responsible for tropical deforestation. Foresters contest this, however, and claim to fell less than three trees per hectare, to open less than one hectare, to clear less than two hectares and to clear the forest only for their base camps and logging sites.

Environmentalists like Colchester do not claim logging is the only problem. "We're not saying logging is the main cause. It is the conversion to agriculture, a lot of which is because of poor people with no choice."

However, logging roads and the access they provide to virgin forests is a major contributor to deforestation.

"There is no doubt that logging has led the way in destroying forests in East Africa and now in central Africa and Amazonia," Colchester said. "Although logging may not give the coup de grace to forests, it does open them up to other problems."

Third World populations are all too often still struggling for day-to-day survival. It is a question of person or tree. And, however much they may enjoy discussing village affairs under a shade tree, people are more inclined to think that a standing forest is there for immediate consumption as inclined to think that a standing forest is there for immediate consumption as it offers no long-term economic advantage.

In such a context, a good tree is one that has been felled, chopped and burned. Fuelwood gathering is draining the forest of its lifeblood, de-

Forests Hold Balance Between Heritage and Hunger

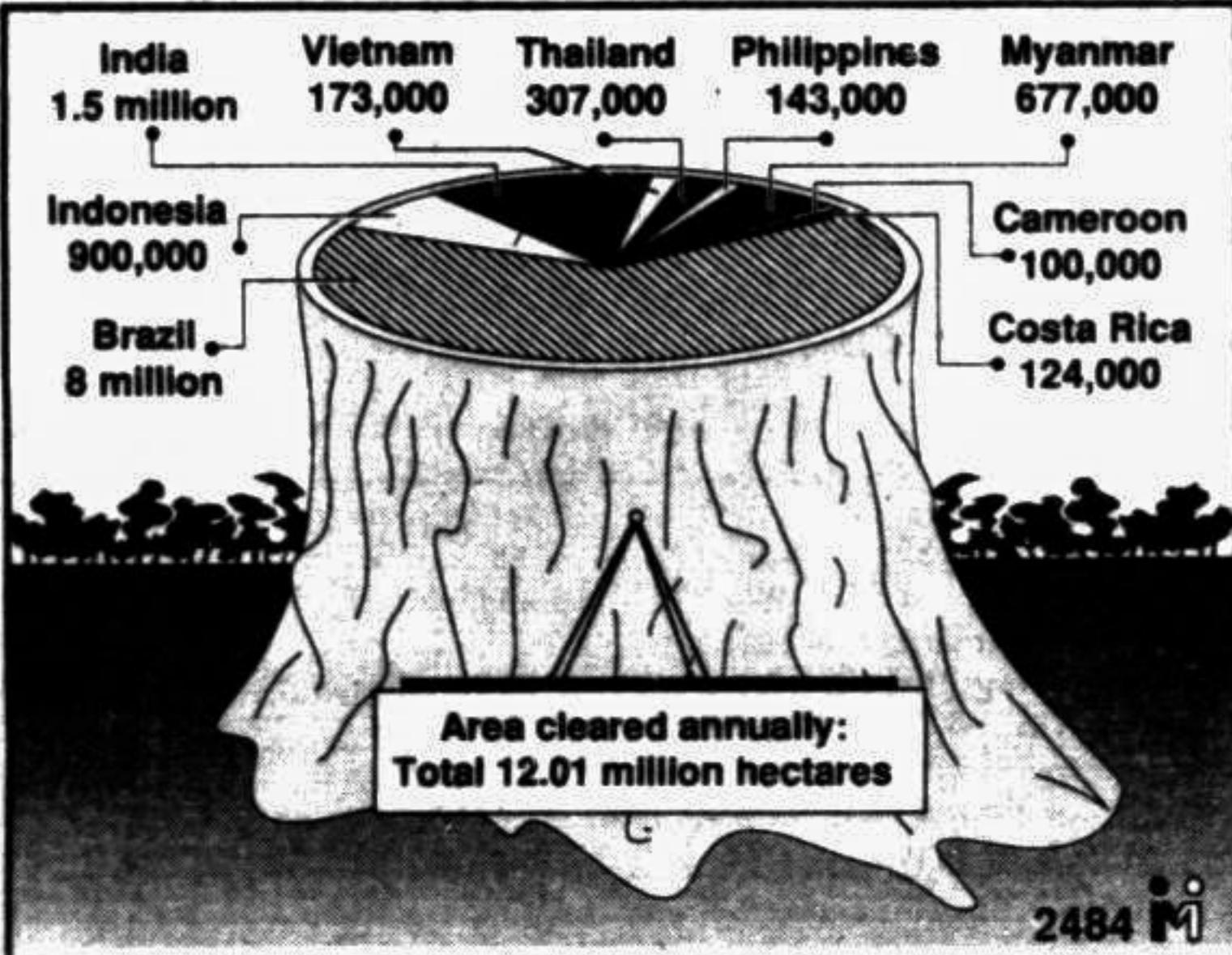
spite many efforts in recent years to spread the use of improved woodstoves in the villages.

Africans, for example, use large quantities of wood for cooking and this is virtually their only source of domestic

energy. In Africa, after periods of drought, farmers have needed alternative sources of income and have collected dead wood for urban traders who do not hesitate to encourage the random felling of trees to supply the increasingly pop-

ulated and expanding towns.

Whole areas are subjected to regular felling as a result of murky deals between local officials, farmers and wood traders. And they go unpunished. Forest wardens are under-resourced and taxes on



Vietnam: the Battle for Trees and Fields

by Peyton Johnson

TO most people the world over the word "Vietnam" flashes instant visions of desperate combat, invariably fought in endless jungles of impenetrable green.

This "TV and movie" view of the ancient nation of Vietnam fosters two major misconceptions: that the Vietnamese people, proud to a fault, are forever at war with some one or other, if not with themselves; and that physically Vietnam, the whole of it, is a "jungle country."

The whole world has come to think of us as just a battleground. Vietnam is a nation and we are a people. We have a history and dreams and hopes like everybody else.

The quicker everybody gets over this obsession about the war, the better for all of us," said an official of the Ministry of Forestry.

The only war going on in Vietnam is the war to put the economy back on its feet and to save our national environment. Rather than too much green, every year now we have less and less. The highlands are more denuded than at any time in our long history. As for the lowlands, there is little, too little, jungle left."

Above 80 per cent of Vietnam's terrain, the official pointed out, is not tropical rain forests but mountain, hill and highland. Once these upland areas were heavily forested. Some have already become wastelands. Many more totter precariously on the brink. The more visibly tropical areas of the lowlands are also shrinking; they are in fact far less green than they were during the most ferocious periods of reforestation, or "regreening" programmes of any Third World nation.

Vietnam, in short, is facing the same relentlessly growing threat that confronts practically every other developing nation — and not a few of those

designated as "developed" — the world over: massive deforestation and all its accompanying woes.

A 2,000-kilometre car ride from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City over bone-jarring "roads" presents irrefutable evidence that the battlefield in Vietnam has switched from the "winning of hearts and minds" to the saving of trees and fields.

Tall hills and rolling highlands once cool and green with pine or Chinese fir strain wearily from the wounded earth in long hot stretches of stony grey, dusty tan or baked-out brown. Every 100 kilometres or so of this seemingly endless via dolorosa great slashes of rockfall and land-slide cut like unhealed scars through what was once good pasture or farmland. In all too many places along the coast, the beauty of the beaches with their clean white sands and clear blue-green sea gives way to the even clearer menace of shifting dunes marching inland to smother rice and fruit fields, swallow entire villages.

Yet the vast amounts of foreign aid and investment that the Vietnamese optimistically expected to flow in once the fighting was over have so far been disappointing. They have come not as a river but a trickle.

Funding for protection of the environment and reforesting the country has been particularly parsimonious. These activities, though inescapably necessary, do not readily attract investors, private or governmental. Profits, if any, usually do not register for decades.

Easy the best of our few friends in dealing with this problem has been, and is, the World Food Programme," said the official. "WFP doesn't have to worry about profits and the agency's officials understand long-term public problems that simply have to be solved."

The World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations specialised agency that uses food commodities and services as development aid, has assisted Vietnam since 1984 through 48 long and short term projects, six still in operation, with food aid valued at US \$320 million. A major emphasis of WFP's larger and longer-term projects has been on irrigation, watershed management and rehabilitation, afforestation and reforestation — in short on protecting and restoring the nation's environment, with much of the

work done by the Vietnamese. "We are and always have been an agricultural people, a nation of farmers. If we don't stop this environmental disaster we will one day face starvation." — Depthnews Asia

Environment

MUSEVENI GETS TOUGH WITH THE TREE-FELLERS

Uganda, with some of the finest forests in Africa, is suffering like so many other countries from the demand for wood fuel. Some 15 per cent of forest area has been lost in a few years. The laws are loose. Now, reports Gemini News Service, President Museveni is cracking down. He says Uganda must not suffer ecological catastrophe and threatens detention without trial for tree-fellers. by Ndyakira Amooti

PRESIDENT Yoweri Museveni of Uganda has ordered an end to all indiscriminate tree-felling and has warned he will invoke presidential powers to detain without trial those bent on destroying the country's forests.

He told people on a tour of the central district: "We are not prepared to see the country plunged into an ecological catastrophe."

Museveni has accused forest officials of corruption and inefficiency and given district commissioners discretionary powers to arrest people destroying the forests.

The President says legislation governing the forests is weak and full of loopholes. The Forest Department tried to pre-empt him by announcing it was outlawing pitsawing. Yet most pitsawyers are not registered and have been given a free hand on private land. Forests in private land are mostly out of the department's control.

The Ministry of Energy, Minerals and Environment Protection supported the pitsaw ban and called for controls on charcoal burning, but it misled the Ugandan public by declaring a ban on timber exports. In fact, the ban affected only the export of raw timber by a government parastatal, Uganda Hardwoods. An Indian-owned private firm, meantime, is making a fortune exporting semi-finished timber goods.

The Institute of Tropical Forests says that just after independence in 1964 Uganda had 6,500 sq km of forest cover. By the beginning of the Eighties this was down to 5,500 sq km — a 15 per cent loss. The Institute estimates the forest will be down to 4,000 sq km by the turn of the century.

Under pressure from international donors and conservation organisations the government forced the Forest Department, hitherto interested in wood exploitation rather than conservation, to put aside 50 per cent of the forest area as nature reserves.

Museveni himself has paid particular attention to the reserves on the legendary

Mountains of the Moon by turning that area into national parks. Parliamentary bills have created new conservation areas.

The Forestry Department had refused to give up control

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