

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, 18 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 incidences 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.

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 decimating 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.

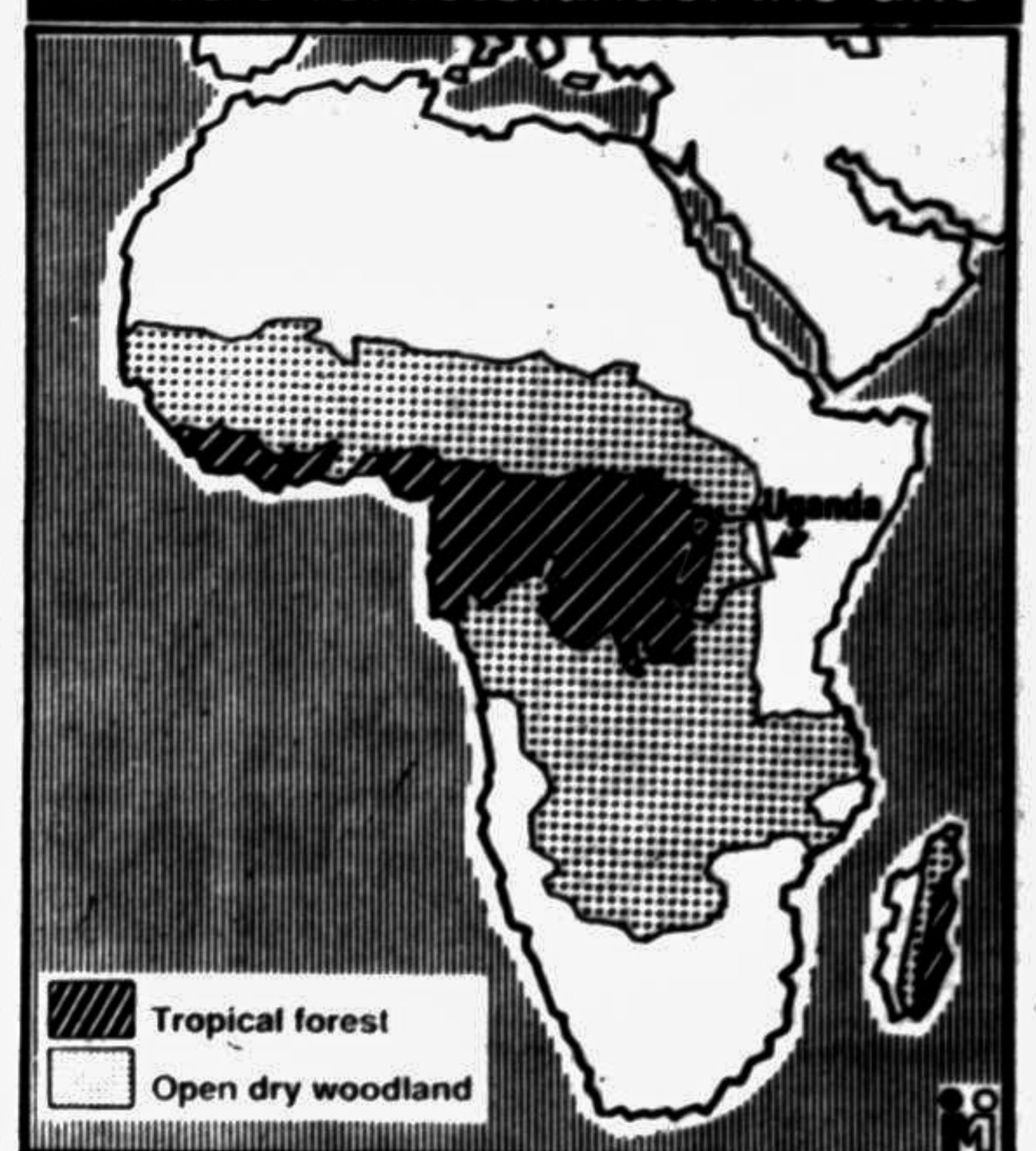
Museveni himself has paid particular attention to the reserves on the legendary

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

crisis. Since Museveni ordered the end of indiscriminate cutting of trees the price of charcoal in Kampala has doubled in weeks. Coincidentally, the electricity board has raised its prices.

Africa's forests: under the axe



of the new parks and Museveni had to intervene personally. Bwindi and Mgahinga in the south western Virunga Mountains are the home of three-quarters of the remaining gorillas in the world.

The parks also protect critical water catchment zones and are the source of hundreds of rivers and streams in Western Uganda. These rivers pour waters into the Nile. Reduction of the flow through environmental degradation could seriously endanger the Nile.

In 1982 wood fuel accounted for 96 per cent of the total energy consumed in the country and Ugandan families are feeling the effect of the new restrictions on tree felling in their kitchens.

There is now a serious fuel

Many families will be forced to cut the number of meals they prepare each day and this could increase malnutrition. Schools, hospitals, hotels and institutions like the army, police and the tobacco industry will be affected.

By 1986 charcoal and fuelwood energy was accounting for 54 per cent of the expenditure of the main chain of Uganda hotels.

Meanwhile, huge trans-border smuggling of charcoal out of Uganda is going on, particularly on the eastern border with Kenya.

People are cannibalising the environment. Yet they do not notice the reduction of tree cover and accept this process of destruction as part of life.

—GEMINI NEWS

The stripping of the world's forests is a growing danger caused both by conversion of land to farming and by commercial logging. The Tenth World Forestry Congress, a meeting of forestry experts sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), meets in Paris to try to tackle the problem. But as Gemini News Service reports, some environmental groups opposed to longstanding FAO policies on forestry, which they see as promoting logging, are planning their own event aimed at catching media attention. By Eric Fottorino in Paris and Allan Thompson in London.

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

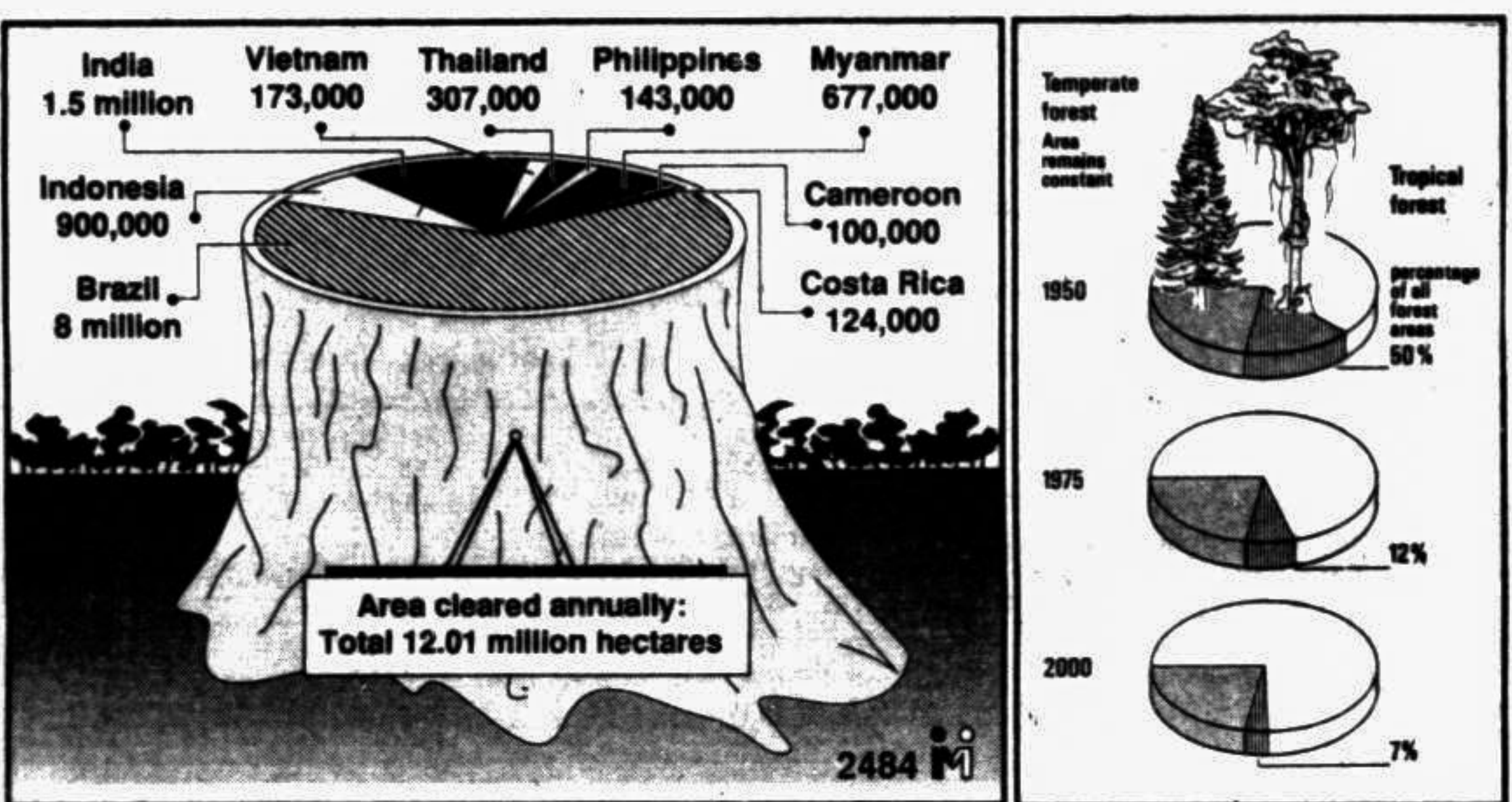
the trade and utilisation of wood are ridiculously low. This attack on the forest is both unethical and wasteful and threatens the fuelwood supply of whole regions of Africa.

It is in Africa more than anywhere else that the farmer is the enemy of the forest, be it willingly or unwillingly. Though a peaceful enemy — after all, he only wants to feed his family — the traditional practice of slash and burn agriculture is wreaking havoc. Whole stands are set alight while the agricultural land thus cleared offers no more than two or three seasons of fertility.

Fallow periods are shortened and crop rotations reduced, then it is time to move on and burn again. This is both unsatisfactory for the farmer, who prefers a settled existence, and for the forest, which requires time to develop fully. In 20 years, the large forest of Fouta Djallon in Guinea has shrunk from two million to 180,000 hectares.

Of course, the attainment of food self-sufficiency is an obsession for many nations subjected to strong population pressure. Many governments bank on high returns from agriculture and turn a blind eye to the clearing of primary forests.

In Cote d'Ivoire, the focus on cash crop cultivation (coffee, cocoa and hevea), has often been at the expense of reforestation.



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 "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 every-body else. The quicker everybody gets over this obsession about the wars, 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 forest 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 visible tropical areas of the lowlands are also shrinking; they are in fact far less green than they were during the most ferocious periods of the hellish wars.

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 battleground 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 landslide 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.

All along this painful pilgrimage — the condition of Highway One itself, Vietnam's only major north-south route is perhaps commentary enough on the unhappy state of the country — too many towns and hamlets lie listless in the killing sun hammered senseless by erosion, desertification, salination, water-logging or new and unwelcome aridity, at once the consequences of past deforestation and the advance agents of more to come.

It is not that the Vietnamese are unaware of these problems. Vietnam has, in fact, one of the most ambitious reforestation, or "regreening," programmes of any Third World nation.

The trouble is that major efforts to save an already badly damaged environment are an expensive business; and if

there is one thing the Vietnamese do not have in abundance it is money.

"A cabinet minister once asked me just how much it would cost to do everything necessary to put our environment into healthy shape," said the forestry official.

"When I told him, I didn't know whether he was going to faint, cry, scream or fire me on the spot. But the problem is still there. It cannot be solved on the cheap."

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 reforestation 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.

"Easily 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

labour financed through WFP's "Food for Work" programme.

"This food aid has allowed us to pay for projects we just couldn't afford on our own. We're broke, you know — flat broke," the official said.

Broke indeed. Vietnam's per capita income last year was just US \$200, slightly above that of Asia's very poorest countries — Bangladesh, Burma, Bhutan and Nepal — but not by enough to brag about.

Just how bad is Vietnam's environmental situation?

"As bad as we can bear," said the official. "If we don't solve this problem, we might as well give up on everything else."

A few statistics bear out the official's lament. In 1943, Vietnam's forests totalled 13 million hectares covering 42 per cent of the national territory. By 1982 the forested area had shrunk to 7.8 million hectares or 23 per cent of the land area. Vietnamese forests today are estimated at no more than six million hectares or about 20 per cent of the land. To make matters worse, the forests are still shrinking at an annual rate of 240,000 hectares a year.

"If this goes on another generation we will have literally no forests left," said the official. "And if we lose our forests we are certainly going to lose all our watersheds and then our agriculture as well. There is nothing hypothetical about this. It is as certain and inevitable as two plus two equals four."

"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

SOILED SPLENDOR: THE TRASHING OF THE HIMALAYAS

Once it would have been hard to believe — that the huge, pristine wilderness of the mighty Himalayas might need protection from people littering the landscape with their trash. But it has become a serious problem and, as Gemini News Service reports, there are now calls for an international conference to find ways of controlling the dispoilers. By A J Singh

THE slopes of the world's highest peaks in the Himalayas, which stretch for almost 2,400 km across India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan and China, were once a pristine wilderness. But no more. Desecration by climbers and adventure travellers has set in motion their ecological degradation.

Food cans, oil cannisters, ropes, toilet paper, cigarette packets, chocolate wrappers, film containers and more litter the trails to the world famous peaks.

Until a decade or two ago, it was a relatively minor problem. Today, it's reached a point where the Himalayas need protection.

The worst-affected region is that around the world's tallest peak, Everest (29,028 ft), whose summit marks the border between Nepal and Tibet. Chris Bonington, a conqueror of Everest, has called it the world's highest junkyard. "There is so much (junk) up there that a full-scale expedition will be needed to remove it," he said.

For years, the dumping of junk occurred only on the Nepalese side of the Himalayas. Recently, climbing Everest from the Tibetan side, up the north-east ridge, has become the craze. Already huge piles of trash have accumulated on this trail.

Rongbuk, the world's highest monastery, which is the setting of the fictional place called Shangri-la, was being used as a rubbish dump and toilet by the climbers. Further up the slope, there is a magnificent view of Everest's snow-covered North face from the 6,500m Advance Base Camp,

now spoiled by abandoned oxygen canisters and other garbage scattered across the moraine, reports Danny Gattings, another climber.

Part of the problem lies in the growing number of expeditions wanting to make it to the top of Everest. When Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay of Nepal first scaled Everest on May 29, 1953, there were no more than a dozen expeditions a year to the Himalayas, amounting to barely 100 trekkers. Today there are 300 expeditions and more than 100,000 trekkers roaming the Himalayas.

For example, during this climbing season, which began on March 1, there are seven mountaineering teams which will be trying their luck on Everest alone. They include teams from Australia, Switzerland, Korea, Nepal and the United States. The US has fielded three teams which will follow the traditional south-east route via the inhospitable South Col.

Everest is still the most sought-after of the 104 peaks in Nepal opened to climbers. It is booked up by mountaineers for the next seven years.

In all, about 70 major expeditions from around the world have been permitted to scale the Himalayas highest peaks. These include Dhaulagiri (26,790 ft), Annapurna (26,504 ft), Kanchenjunga (28,250 ft), Mansalu (27,990 ft), Makalu (27,990 ft), Nanga Parbat (26,660 ft), Turich Mir (25,236 ft), Nanda Devi (25,645 ft), lying in India, Nepal, Tibet and Pakistan.

Shafat glacier (14,400 ft) is the traditional base camp for 3

to 4 expeditions each year for those intending to climb the twin Nun Nun peaks. Recently, an Indo-Tibetan Border Police Expedition burnt a tonne of garbage there which had been left by climbers.

The worst littered area in the Indian Himalayas, however, is the Tapovan area around Gangotri, and in Ladakh.

Things are no better on the Pakistani side of the mountains. Chris Bonington saw heaps of tins, bottles and plastic containers littered around the base camp at the foot of the Diamir face of Nanga Parbat (26,660 ft). He photographed them for his BBC TV series, identifying the nationalities of the culprits by the labels on the garbage.

Bhutan is the only country in the region where the Himalayas have been spared such dumping. The reason is simple: the kingdom does not permit foreign teams to climb its peaks or go trekking to the higher reaches of the Himalayas.

John Barry, who headed a volunteer British trekking team last year which cleared garbage from the southern slopes of Everest said: "Many expeditions to Everest have been British and our climbers appear to be extremely untidy. The climbers are tired at the end of their trip and are glad to be alive. Rubbish is the last thing on their mind."

However, publicity given to the littering by the climbers, and the threat it poses to the Himalayan environment, is creating an awareness of the damage which is beginning to spread around the world.

The Indian Mountaineering Association (IMA) has now laid down guidelines for anyone climbing in the Indian Himalayas. It has offered cash incentives to all expeditions which clean up their camps behind them.

A Himalayan Adventure Trust (HAT) formed two years ago in India, has drawn a strict code of conduct for trekkers, and in Nepal the tourism ministry, which monitors all mountaineering activity, has made it mandatory for expeditions to leave no litter.

Possibly as a result, the size of climbing teams to Nepal has begun to decrease, though not the number of expeditions.