

Environment

Living Environmental Pollution

by Mashruk Zahid

DESTRUCTION of the environment, "Smog and pollution", "Eco-logical imbalance" — these are just some of the topics we come across nearly everyday in our local media. Maybe some of us are too busy to read them, and maybe others just brush through them to satisfy their conscience. But we must consider ourselves very lucky if most of us can give it our undivided attention, considering the gravity of the situation. Yet, the entire matter may be summed up in four words. "Our world is dying". Probably there is nothing we can do about it by now, we can most assuredly hope to delay the inevitable.

As a result, everyone ends up inhaling a lungfull of these poisonous gases. Secondly, these gases are slowly forming a layer which is trapping most of the earth's heat and are going to cause a sharp temperature rise of about 8°F in the next sixty years. This may seem to be a minor increase, but it has already had adverse effects on the environment. Millions of acres of productive arable land have been turned to deserts in the process. This is what has happened in most parts of Africa. Yet we still do not understand that if this goes on, our planet will meet just the same fate as Venus — the planet nearest to earth with an atmosphere of mainly carbon dioxide and sulphur dioxide, not allowing the flourishing of life.

Water crisis

Another of our main crises is the shortage of pure drinking water. Water is one of our most precious resources and

without it the sustenance of life on this planet is unthinkable. A recent report reveals that a shocking 78% of the population of Bangladesh get no safe drinking water. Moreover, due to an increased rate of pollution and excessive deforestation, the supply of water is falling drastically and is becoming scarce. The problem cannot be fully solved just by conserving water. According to the United Nation, 40,000 children die annually of diarrhoea and other complications, all profoundly related to the water crisis. The reason for this is that the water which is available to the people is usually contaminated and exposes those who drink it, mostly the young ones, to the deadly diseases. An immediate answer to this problem, may sound illogical, but a solution must be found out. One of the solutions is to ban the contaminants, but even this has not been very effective so far.

Primary producers

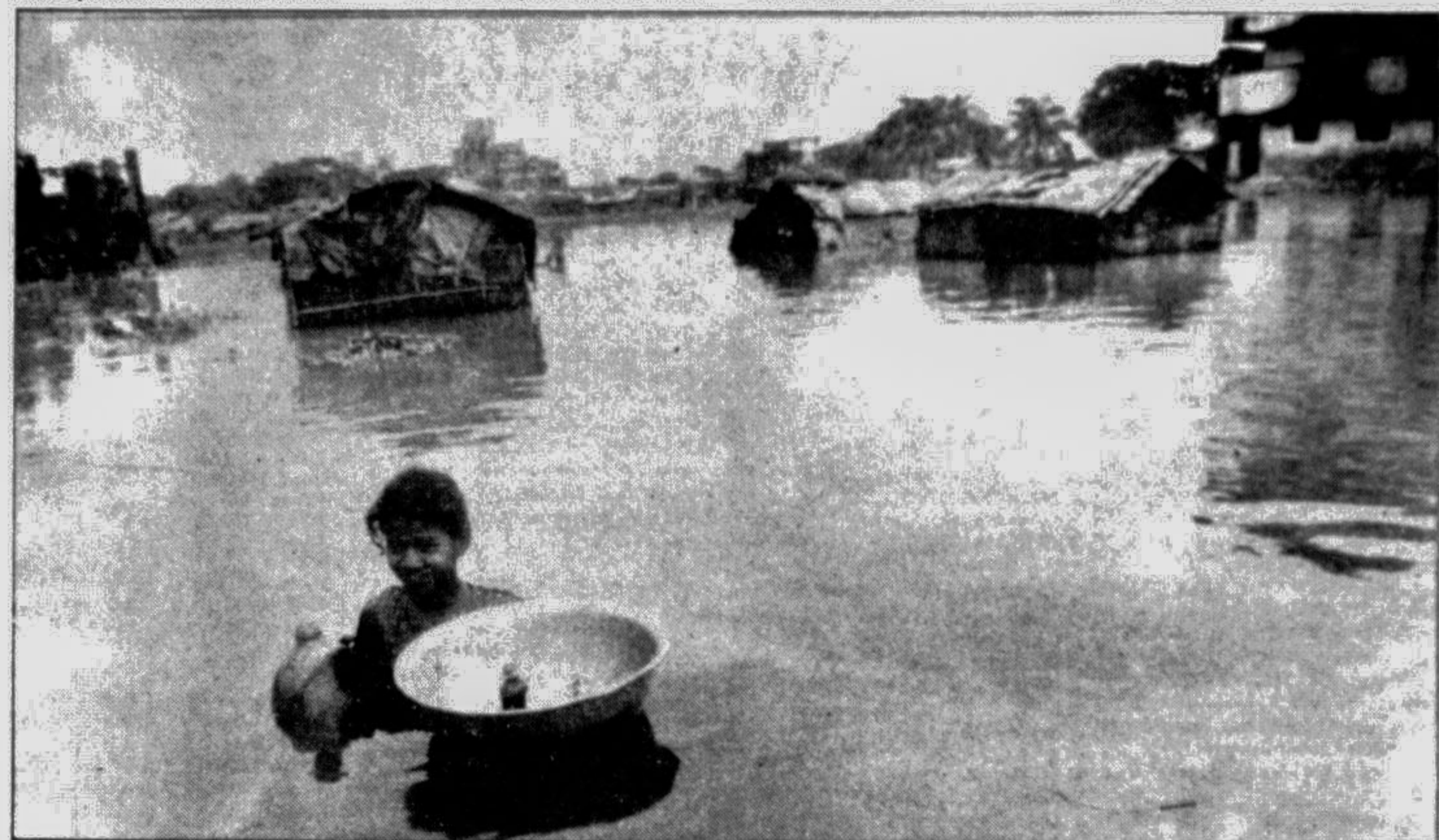
In an ecosystem the plants

are the primary producers. They derive their food through photosynthesis, utilizing environmental raw materials such as light, water, carbon-dioxide and minerals. These elements are then recycled back to the atmosphere by other natural means. However, the balance of nature is being hampered globally by deforestation and soil erosion. One of the effects is the subsequent rise in temperature by the Greenhouse effect, which is melting the ice from the polar regions and causing a rise in the sea-level. The result of this will be devastating to countries like the Maldives and Bangladesh where a massive chunk of land will be submerged under water.

Government action

The government is well aware of the present situation and should take all the necessary steps to prevent pollution and deforestation. Yet illiterate people, who consist 67% of the total population of Bangladesh seem to have

turned a blind eye to our plight. This is mainly because the poor people depend on the environment for their living. They burn harmful and potentially dangerous substances in open fires and we cannot even ask them to take up the alternative of using expensive unpolluting materials. All cars and other vehicles give out carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide and traces of solid lead oxide which are all very harmful and irritating to the eyes and skin. These gases have been the cause of various lung complications and even bring about a deteriorating condition in the brain. But the car owners seem to do nothing to prevent the emission by fitting proper equipment to their cars so as to stop this deadly contamination. Their action may at first seem justified, for it would require a lot of money. But it is not just the money but all our lives that are at stake here. Of course, the technology is also very essential. We are a poor nation and scientifically quite backward



Deluge but not drowned

Photo: A. K. M. Mohsin

Australian Legislation Puts Forests in New Danger

by Damien Lewis

LEGISLATION being introduced in Australia will hand over 80 per cent of the remaining forests — or everything not protected in reserves and national parks — to large-scale commercial logging and pulp.

So-called Resource Security laws will open up vast tracts of public land. Environmentalists fear this means the government has abandoned the

to be paid to the timber industry if any forest area is to be protected in future. The Labor government came to power in 1983 partly through its pledge to use Federal powers to stop the Franklin Dam flooding parts vast tracts of Tasmanian forest. Throughout the Eighties, Hawke used Federal powers to overrule state export licences granted to loggers. Three new

the norm. This is having a disastrous effect on the rare and rich wildlife inhabiting Australian forests.

And, as in the tropics, the destruction is driven by the demands of the rich nations for raw materials. Forests are mined, chiefly by Japanese multinational companies, and timber is exported either as raw logs or wood-chips.

strong commitment of environmental issues which helped bring Prime Minister Bob Hawke's Labor government to power in the early Eighties.

Resource Security — or "resource robbery" as the Australian Wilderness Society and the Australian Conservation Foundation call it — was first mooted by the government in March 1991 in response to a fierce campaign by the timber industry.

The government proposed legislation guaranteeing "Resource Security for major New Industrial Wood Processing Projects." Under it, any project involving \$A100 million of investment and aiming to increase exports or replace imports would be guaranteed access to forests.

In Australia 20,000 hectares of forest are cleared for export each year, either as wood-chips or timber. Thought Australia supports tropical and subtropical forests, its temperate forests are now the most common. These range from the tall forests — Karri and Jarrah — in West Australia to the temperate rainforests of Tasmania.

At present, 88 per cent of Australian forest is not protected as national parks or reserves. Under Resource Security, these forests will become "permanent production zones." The government's own Green legislation, like the Environment Protection Act, will be largely emasculated, while compensation will have

World Heritage areas — Franklin River, Daintree Wet Tropics and Kakadu National Park — were created.

Yet Hawke is now being accused of turning his back on the environment. In an attempt to distance himself from recent environmental controversies, he has launched a "New Federalism," which will seed most of the power on environmental decision-making to state authorities.

Resource Security directly contradicts Hawke's past environmental aims. In the late Eighties, the Resource Assessment Commission (RAC) was set up to examine all natural resources disputes. The draft RAC report concludes that "over cutting, not the inclusion of producing areas in national parks (is) the main cause of the dwindling supply of hardwood logs, the inquiry can find no instance... where large areas of forest have been managed on a sustained yield."

"Despite years of documented abuse of these forests," says Shelley Braithwaite, of London Rainforest Action Group, "the government is rewarding the same multinational timber companies by providing guaranteed access to the last old growth forest."

The environmental destruction caused by clearfelling Australia's forests is similar to logging in tropical rainforests. Soil erosion, river siltation, wild fires and massive greenhouse gas (CO2) emissions are

The battle over Resource Security has now been well and truly joined. In December, the Tasmanian Labor government was forced by Tasmania's Greens, who hold the balance of power in the region, the abandon Resource Security.

Labor's proposals — to legislate over one million hectares of forest as a "permanent production zone" — would have embraced all forests not protected as National Parks or World Heritage areas.

Through new techniques like cable logging, which enables clear-felling on extremely steep slopes, such world famous areas as the Picton Valley, the Torkine Wilderness and the Great Western Tiers would have been logged.

Tasmanian Greens can claim a momentary victory. But the battle over the native forests of Australia is only just beginning. Likewise, in the United States, Canada, Finland and Russia, environmentalists and ordinary citizens alike are fighting to save the remaining forests.

At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro next June the survival of our forests will be decided.

As the world prepares for it both North and South need to recognise their responsibilities to preserve the planet. — (GEMINI NEWS)

Marketing whiz turns Focus on green cause

by Lita Consignado-Lee

VIBEKE Skat Rordam is living "green" these days. Embracing the "Caring for the Earth" strategy of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), she is waging her own battle to save the planet. Ms Rordam lists the dos and don'ts she has adopted since becoming a convert of the "green" movement. I make it a point to buy recycled paper. I buy shampoos that don't damage my hair and don't harm the environment.

changes in lifestyle, less waste and more partnership among peoples and nations, there is no way this projected number can be supported by the environment, the "Caring for the Earth" document points out.

Her work has taken Ms Rordam to various Asian countries like the Philippines (where she was a recent visitor) and Australia to coordinate with 28 WWF affiliates and national organisations. She helps strengthen their management structures and makes sure that

directors," she says. Even from where she sits, the WWF executive still feels that women managers are not regarded by the men as their equal. "Women have to be better than men to achieve, to be respected. They have to work harder. Conditions are changing but it will take long, probably one or two generations more, for women to be accepted as men's equal."

Ms Rordam first served the nature organisation as secretary

Women are key players in nature conservation because they educate their children and thus the next generation

"For a couple of years now I have been patronising stores that sell vegetables from gardens that don't use pesticides and insecticides. While before I didn't care whether we use up a lot of energy to light or heat our home, I care a lot now. I put out lights not needed and heat our house less."

Ms Rordam's involvement is not just on the domestic front, she is the WWF's director for regional support, and is tasked to see to it that people take steps to safeguard the environment while they work to improve the quality of life.

The "Caring for the Earth" strategy which Ms Rordam espouses is a follow-up to the World Conservation Strategy of 1980 launched by the IUCN-World Conservation Union, the United Nations Environment Programme and the WWF. It sets forth nine general principles for sustainable development and, in an action programme, lists 130 things communities can do towards this goal.

In the last 200 years the planet has lost six million square kilometres of forests. Soil erosion pours three times as much silt into the world's great rivers as it did a century ago. Since the mid-18th century, the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere — spewed by human activity — has increased by 27 per cent, seriously affecting climate. Chemicals produced by industry have damaged parts of the ozone layer which shields life from the sun's ultraviolet radiation.

Humans continue to press the Earth's ecosystem to their limits as world population is projected to double by 2050 from the present 5.3 billion. Unless there are major

projects get implemented as planned. Women, says Mr Rordam, are key players in the WWF strategy because they educate their children and in doing so, likewise influence the next generation.

"Form my travels, I know that women are fully aware they have to safeguard the environment for their children to have a decent quality of life," she says.

Among the women-initiated projects she has seen, Ms Rordam finds the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya most impressive, because it is simple and easily understood. The project is implemented by women and children who are required to plant two trees — one for shelter and shade which should not be cut, the other for daily needs such as firewood.

She points out other ways in which women can work for the environment. They can vote for or support politicians who espouse environment programmes. They can influence companies to produce more environment-friendly products by endorsing such products to kin and friends.

She concedes though that are deterrents to women's more active participation in such concerns. "Women have to hurdle basic problems related to gender. They should have equal rights and equal access as the menfolk to employment opportunities and social resources.

Being the first woman to hold a high post at the WWF, Ms Rordam speaks from experience. "WWF used to have only men holding the posts of

typical general of WWF Denmark. "Even in a Scandinavian country which is supposed to be very liberated, it is very special for a woman to hold an executive post. Back then when I went to meetings, the men would look at me, probably wondering what I was doing there. Some shrugged their shoulders as if to say, 'at least she won't do any harm.'"

Despite the odds, Ms Rordam had seven fruitful years with WWF Denmark after which she was recruited to Switzerland because of her marketing background. "The WWF people were aware that non-profit organisations (like WWF) should be run like any other business to ensure success," she says.

Ms Rordam has fully displayed her marketing acumen while she was promotions director for Tupperware, maker of plastic housewares. The company had a marketing pool of 6,000 — 99 per cent of them women. Although they were not regular employees, says Ms Rordam, "they were completely motivated to work hard."

But the shift from a profit oriented company to WWF is for her a most welcome change. "My job now is extremely interesting. Nature conservation and environmental issues are complex because they interlink with social as well as economic and development issues. I learn new things all the time and the more I know, the more crucial it becomes that we should do something to preserve nature."

— (Depthnews Asia)

New Strangers at the Door

Environmental Refugees

by David S. Lazarus

IT is the year 2030. The earth is the warmest it has been in the past 120,000 years. The oceans have been growing since the late 1900s, expanding with the change in temperature and the melting of the polar ice caps. The land has shrunk. High seas and storms penetrate further inland. Wet areas are wetter, dry areas drier. The one-metre sea-level rise has flooded Bangladesh, threatening the lives of 10 million people. The Maldives are in danger of disappearing completely. In Mauritius, towns and airports are continually flooded, aquifers are contaminated by salt water. Governments around the world rush through new legislation to deal with what could possibly be the greatest swell of refugees since the Second World War.

The environmental refugee, a new, sad category of the distressed and displaced, is born. The environmental catastrophe just described is global warming — caused by emissions of carbon dioxide, chlorofluorocarbons, methane and other "greenhouse" gases. Scientists estimate that a rise of around 2.2 degrees centigrade is expected by the middle of the next century. It does not seem much, but previous climate changes have taken tens of thousands of years.

Global warming, however, is only part of the scenario. Even today, we have already witnessed a third of the world's land surface turn to sand, as soil is over-used and eroded. The Worldwatch Institute estimates that the yearly topsoil loss is 25 billion tons — roughly the amount that covers Australia's wheat lands.

The rate of destruction of tropical forests is about the equivalent of one football field per second (or 21.5 hectares a minute). The burning of forests introduces millions of tons of greenhouse gases and pollutants into the air. Increasingly

Now, the change is occurring with frightening speed, faster than the rate at which plants and animals can adapt.

The Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, which is working towards an international policy on climate change, estimates that 300 million people would be affected by a one-metre rise in sea level as islands and coastal regions are flooded.

But long before that, changing rainfall patterns will affect crops. In Africa, erosion and desertification and a population explosion have seen the food produced for each African fall by 20 per cent since the 1960s. Globally, food production is also falling behind population growth.

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scientists blame desertification and deforestation for the worsening of droughts and floods.

Environmental destruction is thus already a salient cause of the refugee problems. In the Horn of Africa, drought, famine, floods, persecution, war and civil conflict have

Throughout history, strangers have gathered at the door of nations — refugees from political persecution. But with mounting evidence of a global environmental disaster that has already begun, a new category of refugees must be considered — the environmental refugee.

brought the refugee population in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan to two million, many of whom have lived as refugees for many years. In 1985 journalists interviewing refugees in camps along the Sudanese border concluded that the refugees had fled drought, not conflict.

From 1969 to 1973, in the Sahel region of West Africa, drought and the severe famine that accompanied it created more than one million

refugees. The Ethiopian Government concluded that the primary source of famine was not a drought of unprecedented severity, but a combination of bad land use and steadily increasing human and stock populations over decades. It is chilling to note that today 90,000 square km of Ethiopian farmland is losing one billion tons of soil per year due to erosion.

As long as dense populations inhabit the world's industrial zones, the potential for more environmental refugees fleeing from contaminated air, food and water will exist. Chernobyl, Bhopal and Seveso in Italy, were industrial accidents that forced people to move from the vicinity of the disaster. Some of the displaced people have still not gone home indeed never will; their lives have been shattered, forcing them to rebuild as best they can.

As the world's population will at least double in the next century, the people most vulnerable to environmental catastrophe may have nowhere to go. Already, a UN report predicts that, by the year 2000, 77 per cent of Latin America's population, 41 per cent of Africa's and 35 per cent of Asia's will be urbanized. The pressure on cities is already great, creating slums and overcrowded unsanitary conditions. The urban sprawl will also use up arable crop land.

An example of urban degradation may be found in Haiti, which suffers from the world's worst erosion, where declining land productivity has sent many people into Haiti's capital city. The population of Port-au-Prince has doubled in the past 10 years, and half a million people live in crowded slums. In addition, one sixth of the population (one million people) fled to the United States where they sought asylum. Many of them fled in boats, emulating the hapless Vietnamese boat people.

While political considerations were paramount in the search by the Vietnamese for a new home, there was another pressing reason that led to their exodus. The massive bombing and chemical and mechanical destruction of their forests during the war, made the land barren and the people sick. A 1985 UNEP report on

environmental refugees concluded that a study of the inland forests of South Vietnam established that the wartime herbicidal damage of more than a decade ago was still much in evidence.

Nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific has also forced people out of the small islands and atolls, as high radiation levels threaten their habitat. The conflict in El Salvador, concludes the US Agency for International Development, is the cause of fundamental environmental as well as political problems stemming from resource distribution in an overcrowded land... almost complete deforestation, massive soil erosion and loss of fertility, siltation threatening hydro-power developments, and the large scale extinction of flora and fauna.

People are seeking refuge not only because of war and/or persecution — environmental degradation is also a reason for the exodus. But, as yet, they do not come under the purview of the UN 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Nor do economic refugees, people seeking a better quality of life which they are denied in their own country because of colour, race, creed or political belief. But economics fail or collapse due to mismanagement of resources, both natural and human, and because often political decisions are made without people in mind.

The 1951 Convention, as amended by the 1967 Protocol, in widely recognized by the international community. In a nutshell it defines the term "refugee" as any person who "owing to a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, owing to such fear... to avail himself of the protection of that country."

The original 1951 definition was designed to address the plight of refugees in a post-war Europe. In 1967, confronted with a new refugee situation and a different geopolitical order, the new UN guidelines now consider people from any time and any place. — (Our Planet)



Environmental refugees