

Saving the Earth and Ourselves

THE much awaited United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) popularly known as the Earth Summit began at Rio de Janeiro on June 3rd. The World Environment Day coincided with the summit and was held on Friday, June 5th. The theme this year is suitably: **ONE EARTH-CARE AND SHARE**. In the keynote address, UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali said, "Time to find new ways to use the Earth." The key word is 'use' not 'abuse'. It is easier said than done. Abusing nature is one of our bad habits that die hard.

Twenty years since the world community first met in Stockholm on June 5th, 1972 under the watchful banner "ONLY ONE EARTH" this planet has suffered great degradations and undergone terrible changes. Man has stripped the planet bare. Now environmentalists believe we have only 10 years left. No, not 10 years until we all die but 10 years for us to get a hold of ourselves. Just 10 years to recover from this drunken stupor and step on the brakes. Yes, there is still hope...

Pictures sent to earth from satellites show an almost peaceful and pristine planet. Almost, because from that high up there is much that cannot be seen: the hole in the ozone layer, global warming, fouled rivers, dirty urban air, exhaust emitting vehicles, spreading deserts, depleted rainforests and mines, and all five or six million of us are also invisible from way up there. What can be deducted are the effects of all these on the planet. Jacques-Yves Cousteau, now 81 years old and a pioneer in the field of environmentalism, was the first to realize how fragile nature is. He once said, "Nature is cruel, nature is violent, nature does not know what justice is", yet nature is beautiful. Our earth system consists of a complex and difficult web of life — often violent. In an attempt to subdue the violence, man has invented various means to kill diseases, and germs, insects and spiders, cleared forests, drained swamps, dammed rivers, mined mountains and caves, killed off animals along with countless people who were better integrated with nature than all of us.

We all know exactly what we have done to destroy the environment, the list is endless and we have published enough articles to make us all environmentally aware. Now we need to take steps to learn what we can do to save the planet. This list is just as long: we can plant trees, stop abus-

ing natural resources, tune our cars, use less electricity and water, etc., etc., etc. The point is to take note of what has been done and what effects they are to have. Our intent now is to raise questions about what kind of environmentalists we have become, and to consider what else we need to know to fight more effectively against the despoliation of our planet.

More than a hundred world leaders came together to attend the 12-day conference. Unabated growth and development have led to unimaginable destruction. Now this once-secondary topic has taken up the primary role in world politics. Reuter reports that "each day the world leaders spend talking at the summit 16,500 hectares (40,600 acres) of arable land will turn into dust." Land abuse is a re-

by Naheed Kamal

are planting a thousand trees for all the millions being cut down. So we pass laws. Laws are futile attempts to control anything. If the people are not motivated enough to put an end to all the wrongs, then no amount of laws can put an end to it. Every complex system has an easy exit and these laws are the easiest to evade. Every day we hear plaintive cries about the unbearable heat wave that is sweeping across the nation, but do we stop to consider why this is happening? Why doesn't it rain? The answer is simple: The weather has gone haywire. Well it is time to do something about it. What can we possibly do to save the planet?

Well, we can start by planting trees. Everytime a tree is cut down, say the Mayans, a star falls from the sky. At the rate we are going, in ten years

A more realistic step is the afforestation programme. At least some people are planting a thousand trees for all the millions being cut down. So we pass laws. Laws are futile attempts to control anything. If the people are not motivated enough to put an end to all the wrongs, then no amount of laws can put an end to it.

sult "primarily of unavoidable human faults," claims Till Durnhoffer of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The theme for the summit is appropriate because the greed and selfishness have got to stop. Town planners go on razing forests to the ground and we read about Pakistani troops burning down forests to smoke out bandits on Environment Day! What do they care about the temperature rising and polar caps melting? The governor of the state of Amazonas in Brazil claims "Environmentalism is a plot to keep the Amazon poor." Then President Bush refuses to sign the biodiversity treaty. What they forget is that a depleted rain-forest in Brazil can effect the Alps and even Bangladesh and so on so forth.

In the weeks of the summit everybody went into a frenzy of environmentalism. Vigorous activities marked the occasion. First and foremost came the seminars and processions. Where do these fit into saving the planet? They all carry banners proclaiming their willingness to help do the right thing but what good does a march do? A more realistic step is the afforestation programme. At least some people

time the sky will be void of stars. The earth had an approximate of 47% rain forests but in a mere decade nearly 7% of the trees have been cut down. When the trees are felled and we are not cutting down our carbon dioxide production at the same rate then there is more of this poisonous gas in the atmosphere and not enough trees to make oxygen and so the atmosphere gets warmer and so global warming and so polar caps melting and so on so forth. Everything is related. No matter how we try to be islands it is not possible: we are one big family and any death in the family can and will affect each and everyone of us either directly or indirectly.

Chemicals have posed as a great threat to the environment. More than 80% of the creatures on earth are insects or spiders. For every pound of us there are 300 pounds of them. An awful thought but that is the truth. This every awful thought led man to try and kill them. Insects are of course pests. They not only crawl into our food, skitter across floors at night and disrupt picnics, but they also de-

stroy crops and kill millions annually with the diseases they carry. But try as we might, we cannot control them. We are losing the "bug war" because biology is on the other side. Hopes of ridding us of all forms of deadly insects came to surface at the end of World War II, unleashing a half-century of all-out chemical warfare against the bugs. And now our rivers, lakes, oceans, air and soil are laced with these deadly chemicals and so are we!

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) pesticides are responsible for more deaths in the developing countries than all the major diseases. It is even more ironic to find that some of the more widely used agro-chemicals are derived from substances which originated in Nazi laboratories during the World War, where these were made to kill people, not pests. Some of these are so lethal that a single drop in the eye can mean death.

Unlike humans who take forever to adapt, pests have an amazing ability to adapt to circumstances. If we zap them long enough with all these stuff, then they become immune to the poison. Eventually this resistance built-up makes them even stronger. Thirty years ago Rachel Carson wrote "Silent Spring"—the sad tale of DDT's effect on the ecosystem. Because pesticides poison the entire system, we end up paying the path for our own destruction each time we try to introduce a stronger means of destroying pests. Nature is much too strong for us to combat. The tables seem to turn on us each time making us, the attackers, into the victims. Like pesticides plastics are leaving behind traces of carcinogens all over the place. A new craze is to recycle everything. However in our country this process is yet to be introduced. As a matter of fact recycled drawing paper costs more than non-recycled paper. Plastic is the most difficult to get rid of so it is recycled from old junk into new: old bottles and caps into dolls. Plastics are not bio-degradable and take forever to disintegrate, even when it does it leaves behind poisonous residues and can cause cancer.

The reason we need to "care and share" is because we are hoping that the future generations won't come out of this ordeal looking like E.T with 4 hands and 6 legs!!? Perhaps environmentalists are fanatical and morbid about their cause. Yet, if you took time out to notice the beauty and wisdom of nature, then you too will get fanatical. The fact is, saving the planet means saving ourselves.

How Do You Tell the Rich to Cut Down on Cars?

by Niala Maharaj

AN old song in Trinidad goes: "If you don't have money nowadays a dog is better than you." This, according to many Third World governments, is the theme of the talks leading up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), to be held in June in Rio de Janeiro.

Many regard the so-called Earth Summit as a potential watershed in modern history, with the global community together deciding whether it is to have a future or not.

The largest-ever number of world leaders will come together to sign an Earth Charter and launch a plan of action to save the planet.

In March the final round of multilateral talks to draft the documents takes place at the UN in New York. If the three

of disease for lack of clean water.

Why should we cut the use of energy when we do not have enough electricity for factories to produce basic goods — and

would be swallowed up by structural trade arrangements. But United States tradition would not allow its delegates to play ball with upstarts crawling out from under

In June world leaders are to sign an Earth Charter and launch a plan of action to save the planet. It will happen at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. Central to the arguments there will be conservation of energy. The developing world, reports Gemini News Service, is asking why it should cut the use of energy when it does not have enough electricity for factories to produce basic goods.

none of us is wasting power blow-drying our hair? How can we tell our people not to clear forests to plant food?

European delegates in Geneva knew that, for once,

stones in countries whose names they cannot even pronounce.

"Open market," they began intoning at every session of the conference, whether to be on

the Third World's must have some means of prising money out of the rich countries in the post-Cold War era.

For rich Europe a few millions here and there will not hurt. People there do not want to lose their privileged position just because somebody somewhere cannot stop cutting down forests to grow food.

And with environment being so dear to the hearts of all those who have lost faith in God and anti-God and politics, Europeans are willing to make sacrifices for a place in the green heaven.

But in North America, where consumption is the mark of success, how do you tell people they should have smaller fridges and fewer cars? How to ask Rambo to please conserve bullets? And still hope to win an election.

There is a glimmer of hope, however, from large environmental lobbying groups around the world. And what has started as a stand-off between Third World groups and powerful Northern organisations like Greenpeace could turn into a meaningful dialogue on the relationship between North-South economic arrangements and environmental degradation.

Many Northern environmentalists confess that they had never been exposed to these arguments before. A good many seem convinced by them and humbled by the scientific expertise the Third World lobbyists bring with them.

These are the people who have forced environmental issues on the global political agenda. They have a good deal of experience in lobbying and popularising ecological issues. Perhaps in the next few years their perspective will expand and begin to seep into public discussion in the industrialised world.

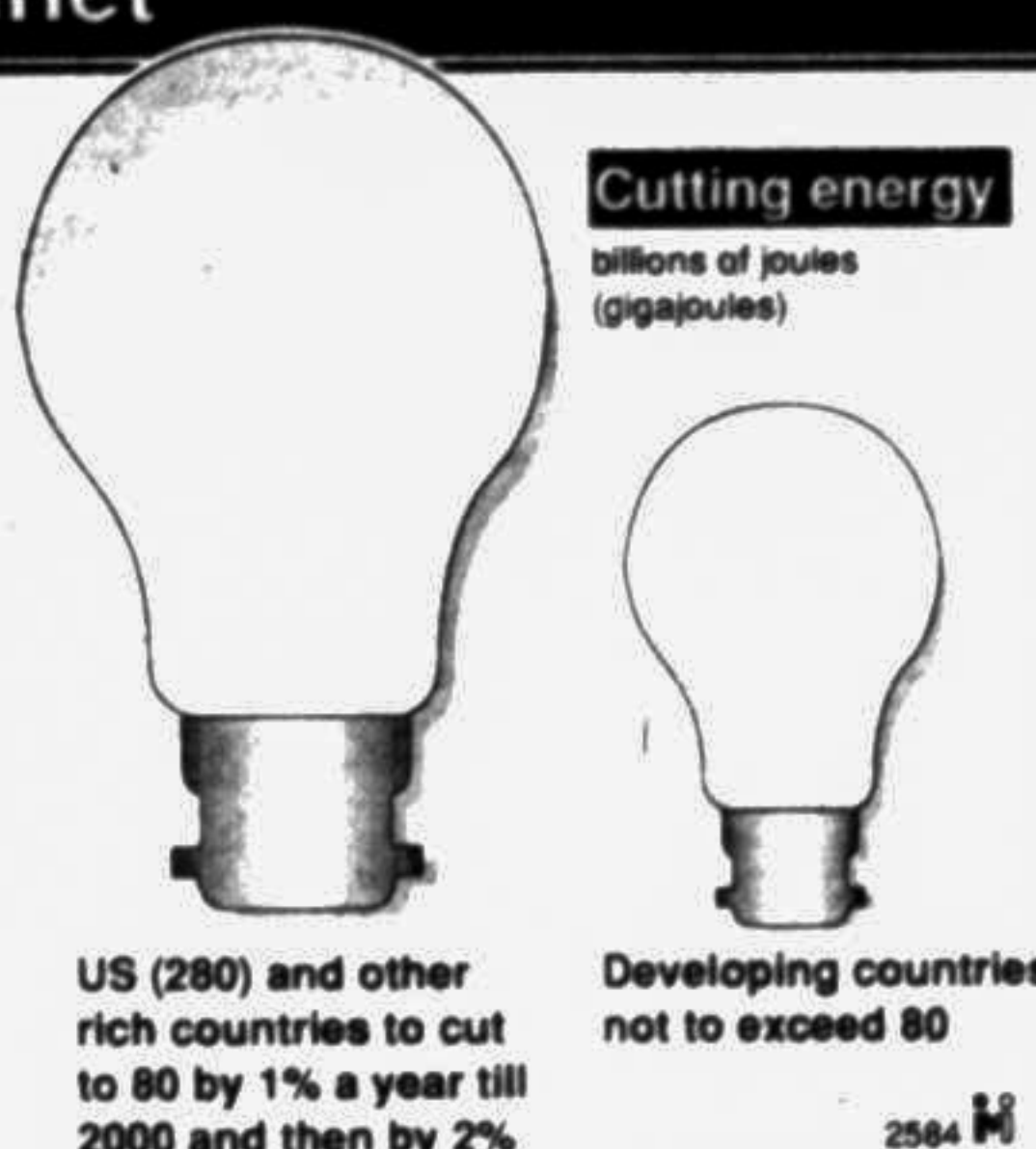
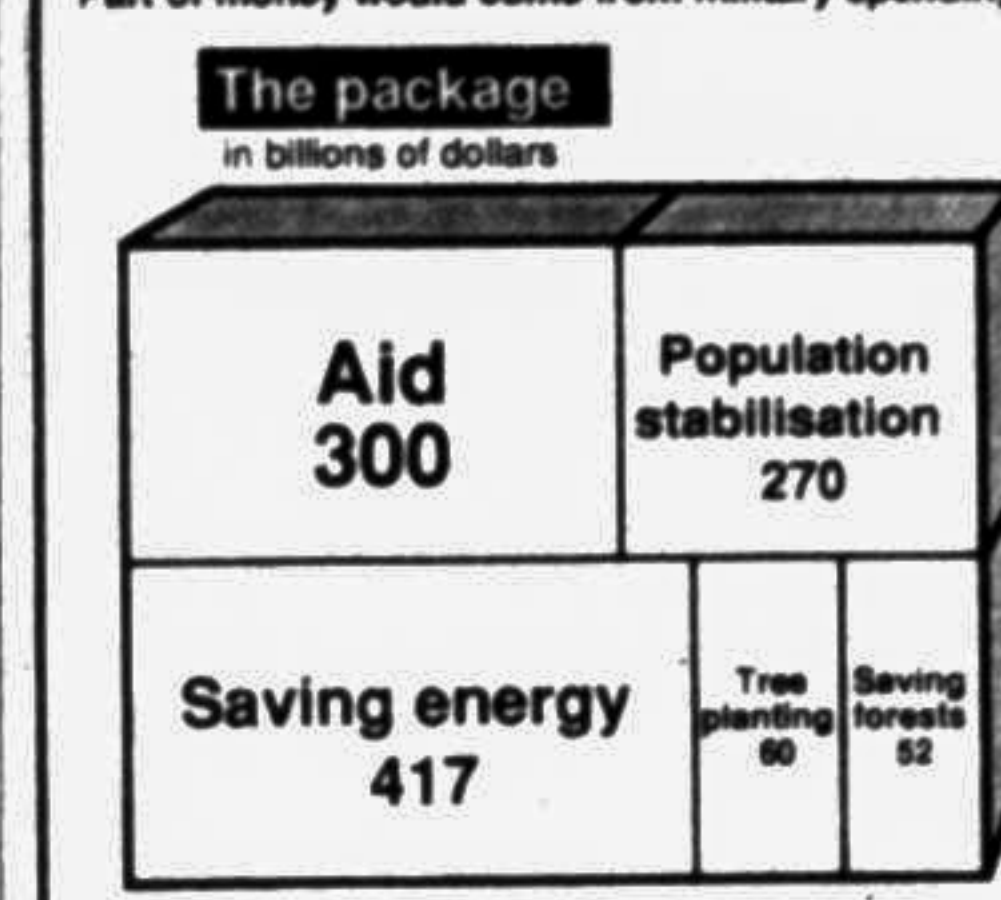
Perhaps, just perhaps, there is hope for the human race after all. Probably not by the June summit, but, if God gives us the second chance we do not deserve, sometime in the future.

However, as the Mexican Ambassador observed, "the environment" is no longer a long-term issue. We cannot afford to fail this time." — Gemini News

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Cost of saving the planet

World environment plan launched in 65 cities proposes spending \$1,298 billion between now and year 2000. Part of money would come from military spending cuts



earlier rounds are anything to go by the whole process is unlikely to produce much result. So far they have merely become a battleground — North v South, rich v poor.

At the last session in August in Geneva, Third World representatives charged that UNCED is aimed at protecting endangered animal and plant species at the expense of one already suffering — homo sapiens.

The measures proposed — for reversing pollution and deforestation, halting climate change, limiting use of natural resources, restricting movement of hazardous wastes and controlling industry — created outrage.

Why should we impose extra taxes on water consumption to conserve world supplies, they demanded, when half our populations are dying

the poor were on the offensive. Haunted by an environmentally-conscious electorate, the Nordics, Germans and Dutch had to reach some accommodation with the delegates from Rwanda, Gabon and Malaysia who control vital bits of the planet's delicate eco-system.

So Dutch Ambassador Leon Mazaraic announced that the European Community was willing to trade environmental regulations for "development assistance." In other words, cash.

The question then was: How much and in what form? The Africans chorused "debt write-off." The Europeans countered with "increased aid" and "transfer of technology."

And everybody happily settled down to work out terms, some Third World governments willing to overlook the fact that any new assistance

oceans, forests, atmosphere, hazardous wastes, climate change or whatever. "Transnational industry is the best means of bringing clean technology and everlasting prosperity to the Third World."

"Transnational industry? The poor countries wondered. Who do you think pushed the polluting industry down our throats in the first place? Who told us that our good old peasant agriculture was obsolete and insisted we use pesticides?"

"Who is to blame?" Mexico's ambassador quoted a woman poet from his country. "She who sins because she is paid, or he who pays to sin?"

Everyone knew it was mere posturing. Just as Western politicians desperately need an agreement on climate change and global warming to forestall creeping green parties, so too

Water — the Precious Natural Resource Abused

RECYCLING is old hat in the water business. This is drinking the same water that the Laotians, Cambodians, Vietnamese and Chinese have already quaffed and then swilled down the Mekong River.

The water one drinks today may contain water molecules that were part of the soup of Genghis Khan, or which may have helped quench the thirst of a dinosaur millions of years before them.

Water is the ultimate amongst the world's renewable resources. Virtually every particle of liquid, solid and gas is connected by the hydrological cycle which continuously transports vast quantities of water around the globe, removing water here, renewing it there.

However, the volume of freshwater which is readily accessible for mankind to use — the water resource — is but a tiny portion of the total transported globally by the hydrological cycle. This accessible water is mainly in rivers, reservoirs and lakes or situated a short distance below the ground (the water level).

There can be no issue that more conclusively demonstrates the integrated nature of environment and development than that of freshwater," says Maurice F Strong, Secretary-General, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED).

Agriculture, for example, is almost totally dependent on the regular supply of freshwater, accounting for roughly two-thirds of its use. An estimated 60 per cent of irrigation water is lost before it ever reaches a plant.

Irrigation becomes very expensive when more than half the water is wasted. The cost in terms of environmental damage is even higher with waterlogged soils, widespread soil salinity and depressed crop yields.

Both surface and groundwater are increasingly contaminated by toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes, and some of

these substances can pose a serious threat to health on the timescale of hundreds of years, says Mr Strong. Health, of course, is most directly associated with problems in the supply of freshwater.

In developing countries diarrhoea causes between four and five million deaths annually in children under five years old. In the first two years of life, as many as 15 of every

In the atmosphere, on the Earth's surface, in the soil and in the rocks beneath the soil, life is sustained and nurtured by water

1,000 children will die from diarrhoea.

Yet the World Health Organisation says water and sanitation improvements can reduce the overall incidence of infant and child diarrhoea by one-quarter and, more important, total infant and child mortality by more than one-half.

Already, over 80 per cent of all disease and over one-third of deaths in developing coun-

tries are caused through the ingestion of contaminated water.

During the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-90), for the first time about 1,600 million people received water supply. About 780 million people also received adequate levels of sanitation for the very first time.

In rural areas the increase

in service was particularly dramatic: the level of safe water coverage rose from 30 per cent to 63 per cent of the population. The number of additional people receiving urban sanitation services rose by 350 million.

At the end of the Water Decade in 1990, the supply of both drinking water and sanitation facilities increased noticeably but failed to keep pace

with population growth.

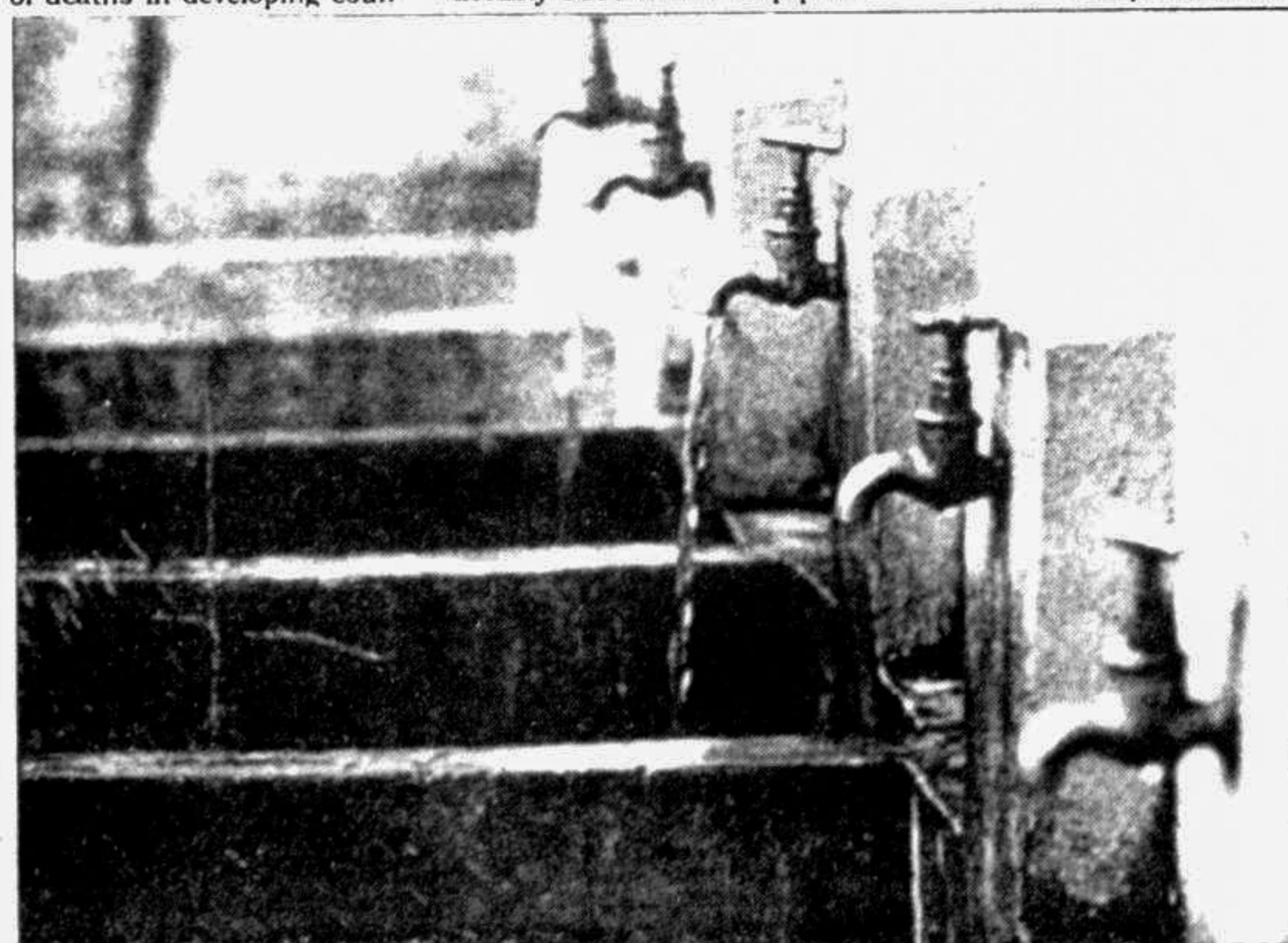
In 1990, 31 million more people were unserved by water supply and 85 million more were without sanitation services than in 1981. And by the year 2000, many countries will have only about half as much water as they had in 1975.

In absolute terms, there are still an estimated 1.23 billion people in developing countries without access to adequate and safe water supplies and 1.74 billion without access to appropriate sanitation.

The total cost of attaining universal coverage by the year 2000 is estimated at US\$36 billion per year — or US\$15 billion for water supply and US\$21 billion for sanitation per year.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has also devised a 10-year plan to promote wiser use of water. It tackles main problems like inefficient use, salinisation and waterlogging, drainage and pollution.

— Depthnews Asia



Damaged Environment Badly Hits Agriculture

by Mohammad Ahsan Kabir

local and wild crop strains needed by plant breeder for improving cultivated varieties.

Environmentalists have reasoned desertification as one of the terrific nightmares so far which is the sole destroyer of the soil surface. This is happening with the spread of

woody plants for fuel ensures a variety of ecological changes that destroy the cover of vegetation and fertile soil.

At present world's desert area stretches about some 800 million hectare and would expand by almost 20 percent by 2000 as an increasing number

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At present at around six million hectares a year are being desertified including 3.2 million hectares of rangeland, 2.5 million hectares of rainfed cropland and 125 thousand hectares of irrigated farmland.

Environmentalists predict that desertification due to overgrazing, destructive cropping practices and use of

of people in the world's drier regions put more pressure on the land to meet their needs for livestock range, cropland and fuel wood. According to the United Nations, about two billion hectares of land are identified as "high" or "very high" risk areas.

Losses due to improper irrigation, reduced fallow periods, cultivation of steep and marginal lands, and reduced vegetative cover can be ex-

pected to accelerate the process, especially in North and Central Africa, the humid and high-altitude portions of Latin America, and much of South Asia. In addition, the increased burning of dung and crop wastes for domestic fuel will deprive the soil of nutrients and degrade the soil's ability to hold moisture by reducing its organic content.

In the industrialised regions, soil losses are more severe as they are frequently using chemical fertilizer, herbicide, and pesticides which in the long run lead to losses of solid organic matter, reducing the capacity of the soil to retain moisture.

Damage to and loss of irrigated lands are vital reasons for devastating environmental consequences on agriculture. It is too tough indeed to maintain the irrigated lands long and about half of the world's irrigated land has already been damaged to some extent by salinity, alkalinity, and water logging. However, it can be prevented if careful consideration of soil and attention to drainage, maintenance and appropriate water-saving designs are ensured properly.

Environmental Conservation for a Future Market

by Dieter Dollken

ENVIRONMENTAL conservation does not prove itself effectively in speeches by politicians, experts conferences or theoretical programmes — but in the daily round of working life.

Motor-vehicle workshops take good care not to simply drain used oil onto the ground or into the sewers, painters avoid the use of lead paints. In demolition work, the asbestos remains are carefully collected; lady customers are asking their hairdressers in increasing measure if their hair sprays contain propellants. Two years ago, the Hamburg-based Chamber of Handicrafts set up its own "Environment Agency", complete with data bank, to provide businesses with advice. The first service of this type in Germany has progressed so

successfully that it can now cover its costs without further state subsidies.

The "core" of this agency is "S-UM-PLUS", an environmental-protection data bank, set

are refuse, soil, air, radiation, noise, recycling, water, energy, resource-sparing processes, health and landscape.

Practical examples: a firm is seeking information on in-

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up in collaboration with the German savings-bank organization and accessible from all parts of Germany. Its purpose is to help in the search for suitable business partners, for the suppliers of environment-oriented products and services. Further areas covered

vestments in a flue-gas desulfurization plant, another is looking for an analytic wastewater chemist. Someone wants to plant greenery on his workshop roof or use rainwater to wash cars and flush toilets. Bakers are provided with information on techniques for

re-covering heat. Tips on waste disposal are specially assembled for painters and varnishers.

So far, the environment agency has prepared compact information leaflets for more than 30 handicraft occupations in respect of their environmental problems. They are also available collectively in a handbook. In this way, artisans are being encouraged to practice environmental conservation in their businesses and made aware of the great future market opportunities in this sector.

Internationally, the Hamburg environment agency is particularly banking on the enormous deficits which have to be made good in environmental protection in Eastern Europe.

(IN-Press)