

Courtship with catastrophe

After decades of helter-skelter economic growth in which the dark side of development was ignored, now governments and citizens around the world have woken up to the damage that has been done to the precarious balance between man and his surrounding. Paradoxically enough, the economic crisis and health sector ills have brought home the need for a more responsible way of doing business as well as to pause and reflect on how the environment could have been better managed.

By Md. Asadullah Khan

It is undeniably true that the human race is not running out of land given the vast open spaces that are still available on the planet. Indeed, Earth's population of six billion people as of today could stand upright within the 5,76,000 hectares of Brunel with a bit of elbow room to spare, but people need extra room to roam, and to grow food. Much of the world's land is too rocky or arid or salty for agriculture. And forests that haven't already been denuded deserve protection; for, they harbour the habitats of endangered wildlife. With the supply of prime turf for farming so tight, according to Washington's Worldwatch Institute, average amount of cropland per person has dropped in 30 years from more than 0.2 hectare to little more than 0.1 hectare.

Concern over global warming and greenhouse effect is deepening everyday. And the fundamental reason for such a complex problem seems widely accepted now: we are adding three billion tonnes of carbon to the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide, methane, chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) and other harmful trace gases. The prescribed cure along with other measures such as reduction of fossil fuel emissions and CFC production lies in stopping deforestation and replanting.

Evidently, the world needs trees, lots of them, to store the carbon produced by a growing population that is irreversibly industrialised. The forests are like giant utilities, providing an indispensable service to the stability of the planet. Forests are carbon dumps: trees extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, emit oxygen and store the carbon in their wood, leaves, roots and surrounding soil. We must preserve the forests that still stand and restore those that have been destroyed. But to state the obvious, trees do not grow everywhere. Climate and rainfall make certain areas better suited than others to the creation and maintenance of large standing stores of carbon. It is only logical that the countries that control actual or potential forest

areas, especially rain forests, will start demanding rent in one form or another for the service that they provide to the rest of the world. Not surprisingly, they have already begun to do so.

Ominously, these rain forests are being destroyed. Most human beings who live in and around them are poor and their population growth continues unabated whether it is in Bangladesh, India, China, the Philippines, Brazil or Indonesia forests, and we must concede that people carrying out destruction to survive. Political problems often contribute to such destruction. In some areas of Costa Rica and also in Chittagong in Bangladesh for example, there is a steady influx of political refugees from neighbouring Central American countries and Myanmar. A vast area in Teknaf area of the Chittagong Hill Tracts has been denuded to find living place for these refugees as well as to scrub out a few more corn patches.

To preserve environment, be it wetlands or forests or African game parks, there must be an acceptable and rising level of economic well-being for the humans who live in and around it.

Forests are burning in Southeast Asia with disastrous consequences. From Indonesia to Malaysia to Singapore, there is a blanket of haze across the region. During 1997, five million hectares of forest, brush and farmland went up in smoke, sending choking clouds of smog across neighbouring nations. They harmed health, devastated tourism and inflicted losses exceeding four billion US dollars. Other than losses caused to these countries there comes a shocking reminder for other nations beyond the borders of these countries. Fire may be burning mostly in Indonesia and the haze may be generally confined to Southeast Asia, but an environmental crisis of this magnitude is of global proportions.

The first task for governments, NGOs and environmentalists is to mount an effort against logging, mostly illegal. Reports have it that General Chea Tara is now on a mission

to save Cambodia's trees. At the same time Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen ordered crackdown on loggers in anticipation of demands by foreign donors, who have now linked forestry reforms to their offer of 470 million US dollars in aid. Interestingly, it has been revealed by the World Bank sources that if felling continues at the present rate the last tree in Cambodia will be cut down in about four years' time.

Environmentalists call for restraint, but poor people, who lack enough food to eat or enough fuel to burn, lack restraint, too. Because of the destruction of trees or other forest cover, elephants and other rare wild animals could be slaughtered so easily. To be sure, without some economic surplus in human society there will never be meaningful conservation and this must be backed up by a strong and effective application of force.

Cambodia and Laos are trying to realise the need for conserving its forest wealth. For

Cambodia forestry represented 43 per cent of foreign trade in 1997 and for Laos it accounted for 15 per cent of GDP in the same year. In Cambodia, the World Bank thinks, trees may generate 100 million US dollars a year. There the main money-spinner is the high quality teak and other hardwoods sent to Europe and America. Now that the worst of Asia's economic troubles are over, demand from South Korea and Japan is expected to rise.

Meanwhile, the vast new market is emerging in China. In July 1999, China imposed a logging ban after the river Yangtze's floods were blamed on rampant logging that had caused soil erosion and prevented water retention. If the ban is enforced, the lack of local wood will become acute. Already imports of tropical lumber mostly from Malaysia and Cambodia have multiplied fourfold. All these have increased the financial attraction of illegal loggers.

What happened in Indonesia is most revealing. Before 1966, some 75 per cent (or 144 million hectares) of Indonesia was forested. But the "New Order" policy introduced by now-deposed President Suharto the

next year declared all forests state property. Large-scale logging began. Now only 53 million hectares are left. The situation is made worse by the uncontrolled manner in which the forests have been plundered. Consequently, plantations, timber states, mining zones and reserved forests neighbour each other in a crazed patchwork.

China has now realised that it is probably cheaper and easier to institute pollution controls while the country is in developmental flux. Once pollution reaches a point where its costs become tangible an example would be the devastating Yangtze flood in 1997, caused in part by rampant deforestation and then the process of cleaning up the dirty air will already have become more expensive than trying to curb pollution in the first place.

The same cycle of torment is repeated in Bangladesh. Surveys by different agencies have shown that the Sunderbans originally covering an area of 10,000 square kilometres has

been reduced to half of what it was 150 years ago. Overexploitation of plant and wildlife is increasing stress on the viability of this delicate ecosystem. Forest lands in Cox's Bazar, Sylhet, Mymensingh and the Chittagong Hill Tracts are under continuous assault due to illegal logging and plundering with the covert support of the Forest officials and other law enforcement agencies.

On the other hand, plantation programme, a yearly event that starts with a lot of fanfare in media, has not gone apace. Forest officials and different government agencies enthusiastically take up a programme of planting saplings throughout the country but shockingly, hardly any attention is given to see if the saplings planted last year are still alive or are growing up. Stunted growth of trees planted on the sides of Dhaka city roads and roadsides years ago only make it clear that these were done in the most haphazard way without proper knowledge about the

depth of soil required for luxuriant and viable growth.

Encouragingly, after decades of helter-skelter economic growth in which the dark side of development was ignored, now governments and citizens around the world have woken up to the damage that has been done to the precarious balance between man and his surroundings. Paradoxically enough, the economic crisis and health sector ills have brought home the need for a more responsible way of doing business as well as to pause and reflect on how the environment could have been better managed.

Efforts are now under way to right some of the wrongs. China, whose factories spew poisons that fall as acid rain on its neighbours, is cutting back on the use of coal and thus reducing sulphur dioxide emissions. In Hong Kong, plans are in hand to clean up the city's ever-thickening air by replacing diesel fuel for taxies with less noxious liquefied petroleum gas.

Billions of people in different regions of the world are also under serious assault caused by wrenching poverty. They might say, "If you care about my forests, you make it worth my while to save them."

But the fact is, if the world really needs the remaining forests, a crash effort must be made to raise the living standards of the people in and around them. Population growth should also be limited; but, in a sense, that is hardly rewarding because there are a lot of people busily cutting down the trees right now to give us trouble. We must pay the people who own the utilities. This puts question like foreign aid and Third World debt into a new perspective. Possibly, President Clinton sounded a prescription like this during his much-vaunted daylong visit to Bangladesh in March this year.

The author is Controller of Examinations, BUET

next year declared all forests state property. Large-scale logging began. Now only 53 million hectares are left. The situation is made worse by the uncontrolled manner in which the forests have been plundered. Consequently, plantations, timber states, mining zones and reserved forests neighbour each other in a crazed patchwork.

China has now realised that it is probably cheaper and easier to institute pollution controls while the country is in developmental flux. Once pollution reaches a point where its costs become tangible an example would be the devastating Yangtze flood in 1997, caused in part by rampant deforestation and then the process of cleaning up the dirty air will already have become more expensive than trying to curb pollution in the first place.

The same cycle of torment is repeated in Bangladesh. Surveys by different agencies have shown that the Sunderbans originally covering an area of 10,000 square kilometres has

been reduced to half of what it was 150 years ago. Overexploitation of plant and wildlife is increasing stress on the viability of this delicate ecosystem. Forest lands in Cox's Bazar, Sylhet, Mymensingh and the Chittagong Hill Tracts are under continuous assault due to illegal logging and plundering with the covert support of the Forest officials and other law enforcement agencies.

On the other hand, plantation

programme, a yearly event

that starts with a lot of fanfare

in media, has not gone apace.

Forest officials and different

government agencies enthu-

siastically take up a programme

of planting saplings throughout

the country but shockingly,

hardly any attention is given to

see if the saplings planted last

year are still alive or are grow-

ing up. Stunted growth of trees

planted on the sides of Dhaka

city roads and roadsides

years ago only make it

clear that these were done in

the most haphazard way without

proper knowledge about the

depth of soil required for luxu-

riant and viable growth.

Encouragingly, after decades

of helter-skelter economic

growth in which the dark side

of development was ignored,

now governments and citizens

around the world have woken

up to the damage that has been

done to the precarious balance

between man and his surround-

ings. Paradoxically enough,

the economic crisis and health

sector ills have brought home

the need for a more responsible

way of doing business as well as

to pause and reflect on how the

environment could have been

better managed.

Efforts are now under way to

right some of the wrongs.

China, whose factories spew

poisons that fall as acid rain

on its neighbours, is cutting

back on the use of coal and thus

reducing sulphur dioxide emis-

sions. In Hong Kong, plans are

in hand to clean up the city's

ever-thickening air by replac-

ing diesel fuel for taxies with

less noxious liquefied petro-

leum gas.

But the fact is, if the world

really needs the remaining

forests, a crash effort must be

made to raise the living stan-

dards of the people in and

around them. Population

growth should also be limited;

but, in a sense, that is hardly

rewarding because there are a

lot of people busily cutting

down the trees right now to

give us trouble. We must pay

the people who own the utili-

ties.

This puts question like for-

ieign aid and Third World

debt into a new perspective.

Possibly, President Clinton

sounded a prescription like

this during his much-vaunted

daylong visit to Bangladesh in

March this year.

The author is currently with

the Adaptation and Impacts

Research Group (AIRG), The

Institute for Environmental

Studies (IES), University of

Toronto, Canada.



The first task for governments, NGOs and environmentalists is to mount an effort against logging, mostly illegal. We have to realise, and make people realise, that depletion of forest actually means endangering our own existence.

Star photo: A K M Mohsin

The neglected mountains

The mountains in the Himalayas have profound influence on the annual hydrologic and water cycles; for example, seasonal water availability and their spatial distribution, which is also closely linked with the water sharing and development negotiations. Knowledge about the Himalayan geologic and climate systems is inadequate to undertake any large-scale project especially in the high mountains. Large-scale projects will require huge financial resources, which are simply not available with any single financial institutions. National level water/energy organisations need to improve their efficiencies in order to attract investment, writes Dr M. Monirul Qader Mirza

THE mountain regions occupy about one-fifth of Earth's surface. Approximately one-tenth of the global population lives in the mountains and they provide goods and services to about half of the world population. The mountains received high attention in Agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The UNCED states: Mountain environments are essential to the survival of the global ecosystem. Many of them are experiencing degradation in terms of accelerated soil erosion, landslides and rapid loss of habitat and genetic diversity. Hence, proper management of mountain resources and socio-economic development of the people deserves immediate attention.

The mountain systems have created complex highland-lowland interactions in South Asia. The large rivers – Ganges, Brahmaputra and Indus – originate in the Himalayas which also control the weather pat-

terns. The Himalayas attracts moisture from the Atlantic, Arctic, Indian and Pacific Oceans. It provides intense freeze-thaw cycles with diurnal changes up to 25°C, resulting in strong erosion. Due to recent warming phenomenon, many Himalayan glaciers are retreating at an alarming rate. Despite their roles in the climate, hydrology and water resources and livelihoods of millions of people, mountains have been left unaddressed in the Vision Document.

Missing visions of the riparian

Without resolving water-sharing problems of the trans-boundary rivers, future of water resources planning and development in South Asia will remain as uncertain as it was in the past. The Vision Document clearly lacks a comprehensive and transparent vision for a broader water-sharing framework in South Asia. While it calls for regional co-operation in social, economic and technological aspects, the Vision Statements kept 'water sharing

out of the scope of regional cooperation.'

For two reasons South Asian nations especially Bangladesh and India should resolve water-sharing problems. So far, water-sharing agreements between India and its neighbours were not entered into based on any principle. Three major water-sharing and development agreements were signed between India and its neighbours in the last 40 years. Signing of the Indus Water Treaty had nothing to do with riparian rights or water needs of Pakistan. The political equation between Pakistan and the USA in the early 1960s compelled India to sign the Indus Treaty. Similarly, political