

Global warming taking toll on India

REUTERS, New Delhi

With India's Himalayan glaciers melting, its eastern islands sinking and freak rain flooding deserts, environmentalists say global warming is already taking its toll on this populous Asian nation.

The UN climate panel issued its strongest warning yet on Friday that human activities are heating the planet, forecasting that temperatures would rise by between 1.8 and 4.0 Celsius (3.2 and 7.8 Fahrenheit) in the 21st century.

In India, the signs already back up forecasts that as the mercury rises the Indian subcontinent, home to one-sixth of humanity, will be one of the worst-affected regions.

"We are already seeing glaciers are receding at a faster rate and islands have disappeared and then there is all this freak weather phenomena," said Shruti Shukla, climate change officer for WWF India.

Experts say the melting of Himalayan glaciers could have serious consequences as more than 500 million residents -- almost half of India's total population -- of the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra river basins rely on them for water supply.

Research about the Gangotri glacier -- which feeds the Ganges -- has found the average rate of retreat has almost doubled to 34 metres (110 ft) per year compared to 19 metres in 1971.

"Glaciers are like a frozen reservoir of water, so when glaciers recede ... proportionally, there will be a decrease in the water, which affects drinking water supply, irrigation, hydro-power," said glaciologist Jagdish Bahadur.

This is likely to exacerbate already widespread water shortages.

Rising temperatures will also hurt the annual June-September monsoon rains, which India is heavily dependent on for its crops.

It is estimated that a temperature rise of between 2 and 3.5 Celsius would result in a loss of between 9

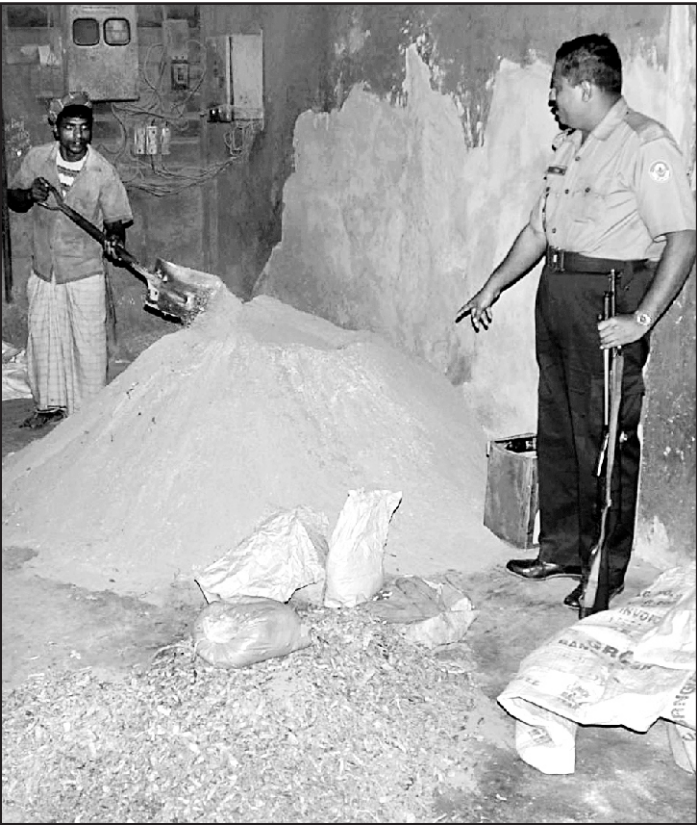
and 25 percent of revenue from agriculture -- which makes up 22 percent of India's GDP and employs 70 percent of the workforce.

Besides, researchers say rising temperatures will mean vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever will spread to higher altitudes known for being free of mosquitoes.

In the Sunderbans, off India's east coast, scientists say two of the 104 islands have disappeared over the past decade partially due to rising sea levels.

"Both islands were inhabited and thousands of people were forced to relocate to some of the other islands," said Sugata Hazra, who teaches oceanography at Jadavpur University in West Bengal, adding that 12 more islands were vulnerable.

In western India, freak torrential rains flooded the desert state of Rajasthan, displacing hundreds of thousands and killing 140 people last year.



Police seized a huge quantity of adulterated chilli powder and arrested two people from Nabi Market at Khatunganj in Chittagong yesterday.

8 US copters for Pakistan to fight militants

AFP, Islamabad

The United States yesterday handed over eight Cobra attack helicopters to key ally Pakistan to boost its military capability against extremists, the US embassy said.

The night-capable, refurbished AH1-F Cobras were given to the Pakistani military by US ambassador Ryan Crocker at a military base near Islamabad, it said in a statement.

The choppers will increase Pakistan's current fleet of 19 Cobras, which were also acquired from the US, it said.

Crocker commended Pakistan's role in the "war on terror" and said that the helicopters were important weapons in "our common fight against terrorism."

"We understand and appreciate the very real sacrifices that Pakistan is making in the war on terror. The majority of important al-Qaeda arrests have occurred because of Pakistan's cooperation," he said.

The handover was part of a 50-million-dollar foreign military sales programme that would provide the Pakistan Army with 20 refurbished helicopters, the US embassy statement added.

The sale of F-16s to Pakistan late last year and the delivery of these Cobra helicopters demonstrated the long-term commitment of the United States to "all aspects of our strategic partnership with Pakistan," Crocker said.

Pakistan has posted 80,000 troops along its western border to combat Taliban and al-Qaeda militants who are crossing into Afghanistan to launch attacks on Nato and US-led forces.

However President Pervez Musharraf said Friday that he was aware of incidents in which some members of the security forces had "turned a blind eye" to insurgent movements.

Syria test-fires Scud missile Says Israeli media

AFP, Jerusalem

Syria has test-fired a Scud ballistic missile capable of striking anywhere in neighbouring arch-foe Israel, local media reported yesterday.

The Israeli army's Green Pine radar system detected the test at the start of the week, according to security sources cited by the media.

The 11-metre (36-foot) missile, which has a range of 700km, was originally Russian built but improved with the aid of North Korean technology, the media said.

"Syria has successfully tested its Scud-D missile, which is capable of reaching any place in Israel, it was reported on Thursday," the English-language Jerusalem Post said.

"A previous test ended in failure when the missile fell apart over Turkish airspace."

There was no comment immediately available from Damascus.

Peace talks between Israel and Syria collapsed in 2000, in part because of disputes over the return of the Golan Heights, the strategic plateau seized from Syria in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

The Haaretz newspaper reported earlier this week that the two countries had reached understandings for a peace treaty in secret unofficial talks over the past two years, but this was denied by both sides.

Lanka steps up security ahead of national day

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka stepped up already tight security in the capital Colombo yesterday amid fears of Tamil rebel attacks ahead of independence day celebrations, officials said.

Security forces armed with tough anti-terror laws increased road blocks and random checks within the city of 600,000 people and carried out searches against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a police official said.

"We have got thousands of constables and troops from the provinces to beef up security in Colombo," a police officer said. "We are maintaining a high state of alert."

Some roads in the capital were also closed as security forces rehearsed for Sunday's independence day commemorations along Colombo's sea-front Galle Face promenade.

Sri Lanka won independence from Britain in 1948. With the ending of 133 years of British rule, ethnic tensions between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils erupted into the open and spawned Tamil Tiger rebels in 1972.

More than 60,000 people have since been killed in the Tamil separatist conflict led by the LTTE. Diplomatic attempts to bring the two sides to the negotiating table have ended in failure.

Tiger guerrillas carried out two suicide bombings killing more than 20 people ahead of the 50th Independence Day in 1998.



After being evicted from footpaths, nursery growers now sell flower and fruit plants on rickshaw vans. The picture was taken from Shishu Academy area in the city yesterday.

'Press freedom improves in Asia despite censors, attacks'

AFP, Hong Kong

Despite the high number of journalists killed or attacked in Asia in 2006 and persistent censorship, Asians are slowly gaining access to more independent, better quality news, media rights group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said on Thursday.

In its annual report on press freedom in Asia, RSF said abuse was still at "alarming levels". Sixteen journalists were killed in 2006, at least 328 arrested and 517 assaulted or threatened. At least 478 media were censored.

But these disturbing figures were "paradoxically signs of greater freedom", or at least the desire for it, the report said.

"For example, journalists in Bangladesh suffer constant assaults and death threats because they tirelessly expose nepotism and corruption among local politicians. In China, the propaganda department regularly removes editorial chiefs in an attempt to curb their desire for independence."

RSF pointed to Asia's two heavyweights, India and China, as opposite extremes in their approach to the media's role in politics.

"In the first, the media make themselves felt more every day as an effective counter-balance to government, capable of exposing even the most powerful," it said.

"In the second, the press, although subject to competition, is still under the control of the party-state, which is sure of its authority and which has no intention of dropping its capacity to censor."

Across Asia, censorship remained extremely widespread in 2006, the report said.

Yet there were signs of hope in the form of private television stations free of government control, in the repeal of laws allowing states to throw journalists into jail and in the falling number of reporters behind bars.

On the negative front, RSF said

"a score of military or communist dictatorships view the media simply as channels for relaying propaganda".

RSF singled out North Korea and Myanmar as extremes of state censorship. It also criticised the communist regimes in Laos, Vietnam and China, and the military junta in Thailand.

North Korea imposed "total control on news content", the report said. In Myanmar, "at times more than a third of the articles and illustrations in privately-owned publications are banned", as is any reference to pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Elsewhere, governments used financial control, religion and moral values to quash free speech, RSF said.