



Sacks of substandard fertilisers have piled up on the bank of Karnaphuli river at Majhirhat in Chittagong for long. Fertilisers from damaged bags are now polluting the river water, but the authorities have turned a blind eye.

## Global warming doubles number of hurricanes

AFP, Washington

Global warming's effect on wind patterns and sea temperatures have nearly doubled the number of hurricanes a year in the Atlantic Ocean over the past century, says a new study by US scientists.

Excerpts from the study by Greg Holland of the National Centre for Atmospheric Research and Peter Webster of Georgia Institute of Technology were released in the United States late Sunday.

The analysis identifies three

periods since 1900, during which the average number of hurricanes and tropical storms increased dramatically and then remained elevated and relatively steady.

The first period, between 1900 and 1930, saw an average of six Atlantic tropical cyclones, of which four were hurricanes and two were tropical storms -- the next category down.

From 1930 to 1940, the authors point out, the annual average increased to 10, consisting of five hurricanes and five tropical storms.

In the most recent period, from

1995 to 2005, the average reached 15, of which eight were hurricanes and seven were tropical storms.

This latter period, Holland and Webster caution, has not yet stabilized, which means the average hurricane season may be more active in the future.

"These numbers are a strong indication that climate change is a major factor in the increasing number of Atlantic hurricanes," Holland said in a statement.

The scientists see a strong correlation between the spike in

storm activity and rising sea surface temperatures, which "feed" hurricanes.

Over the last 100 years, these temperatures have risen by about 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit, or 0.7 degrees Celsius, the study asserts.

The temperatures rose approximately 0.7 degrees Fahrenheit, or 0.4 degrees Celsius, in a period leading up to 1930, which was marked by some of the deadliest storms to hit the Atlantic Coast of the United States.

## French sailor's "floating hospital" brings hope to the poor

AFP, Jamuna River

In a tiny aircraft hundreds of feet above the swirling waters of Bangladesh's mighty Jamuna river, Yves Marre points though the haze to a tiny dot on the horizon.

As the plane descends, the speck in the distance slowly comes into view, revealing itself to be a brightly-painted red and white barge moored incongruously amid the river's bleak and desolate landscape.

Now known as the "floating hospital," 10 years ago this former oil tanker, which Marre sailed from France to Bangladesh in the hope that someone might put it to a good use, was nothing more than a rusting hulk that no one wanted.

Today it is a symbol of hope, dispensing healthcare to thousands of the country's poorest and most deprived who live on the river's many chars, or islands.

"The chars are terrible places to live, the population is expanding more than anywhere else and you see all these children, but there is no future for them," says Marre, a Frenchman, whose mild-mannered demeanour belies a steely resolve to do whatever he can for the largely forgotten char dwellers.

"There are not even the most basic medical facilities. Sometimes they are so poor they cannot afford even to take the boat to go across to the mainland, and if they get there they can't afford to see a doctor," he adds.

The plane comes into land, skimming noiselessly along the water's surface and coming to a halt a stone's throw from the hospital.

A large crowd has gathered to watch. Skinny children wearing baggy homemade shorts gaze in wide-eyed wonder at the plane and its passengers.

Char people are used to being cheated and exploited and are naturally wary of outsiders. So when Marre first arrived in 2001, the people he hoped to help, instead of welcoming the hospital, reacted with fear and suspicion.

"In one place people started to come and they were telling us 'why are you stopping here with a big ship like this? What do you want?'" he recalls.

In an attempt to allay their fears, he invited local leaders aboard for a tour of the boat.

"They were thinking we had some ulterior commercial or political motive so we invited them for tea. We let them look at everything in the boat. We told them 'this hospital is for you'. They couldn't believe it," he adds.

The vast Jamuna river in north-western Bangladesh is dotted with hundreds of chars. On these constantly shifting silt and sand masses

live an estimated 6.5 million people who cannot afford to live anywhere else.

In a country where 40 percent of the population of 144 million lives on less than a dollar a day, char dwellers have to fend for themselves. In addition to a lack of healthcare, there is no education, no sanitation, no work, and no access to electricity or water supplies. Worse still, they face the constant threat of losing their simple bamboo homes to floods and river bank erosion.

Each year, around six million people, many of them char dwellers, are left homeless by the loss of around 2,400 kilometres (1,488 miles) of river bank. Often families will have lived in a particular spot for

can be stranded all winter".

Originally from the southern French city of Toulouse, Marre, 56, a former Air France cabin crew member, had always had a passion for adventure.

A keen hang glider and paraglider, who also taught both, he once achieved the dual feat of being arrested in both France and Britain within 24 hours after building a motorised glider and flying it across the English channel.

After a string of other adventures, including sailing solo across the Atlantic while still a novice sailor, he succeeded in lobbying the French government for one of its unwanted barges.

In January 1994, Marre and just



French doctor Yves Marre takes the helm of a hospital boat as it journeys on The River Bongshi at Savar on the outskirts of Dhaka.

PHOTO: AFP

one other crew member set off for Dhaka.

Unaware of the plight of the char people, but with a strong desire to make a difference to some of the poorest in society, Marre in 1993 set about securing an old barge under a French government scheme to recycle boats that were no longer economically viable.

Today, the converted 45 metre (145-foot) vessel has a six-bed ward, an X-ray machine, facilities for minor surgery as well as for obstetric, gynaecological, and essential dental care.

A medical team of two doctors and four nurses is often reinforced by visiting specialists who give up their holidays to volunteer on the boat.

Together they treat thousands of people a year, many of whom have never seen a doctor before.

The boat, managed on a day-to-day basis by Marre's Bangladeshi wife Runa Khan, travels around the chars staying one or two days at each island before moving on.

Great care is needed to navigate the treacherous currents and channels of the river, where, as Marre puts it, "one wrong move and you

In the meantime, Marre and Khan married, but all was still not well with the barge which ended up abandoned once more in a shipyard.

Having set up a tourist boat tour business, Marre was now forced to watch as the barge fell into a terminal state of disrepair.

"Everyday we were sailing past and I was feeling terrible," he says.

Again he embarked on a rescue plan, aware that this time the chances of success were slim at best.

"I was trying to raise money for a project which had already failed, for a boat that I did not own and on which there was money owed," he says.

The answer to Marre's prayers came one day in the form of a visiting head of Unilever, the Anglo-Dutch food and household products giant, who arrived as a guest on one of his river excursions.

Impressed by the couple's evident vision and drive, Unilever offered to fund the project for three years. The offer led to other sponsors coming forward to help with the 148,000-dollar annual running costs.

Three years later Unilever agreed to continue its support, and two years ago the Dubai-based airline Emirates also pledged funding for a second boat.

Success has enabled the hospital to expand its services to include treatment for conditions such as cleft lips and club feet, although this has also brought difficult decisions.

"Do we fix up 60 children with club feet who could end up as beggars on the street or revive one old man who dies anyway six months later," he says.

For Marre, who is now permanently based in Dhaka with Runa, their young son and Runa's two grown-up sons, it has been a long, sometimes tortuous, but ultimately fulfilling journey.

"When I started from France I thought if I didn't do something with this barge no one else would," he says, adding that he could never have imagined how it would change his life.

He is now hard at work overseeing the construction of the second boat which is due to be operational by the end of the year, while two new ambulance boats will also soon be boosting the service.

If the project's future now seems assured, it is only, say admirers, thanks to the grit and determination of Marre and Khan.

Marre, however, remains characteristically modest about his role.

"I saw it as a personal responsibility," he says. "I just knew I could do something that would provide a certain amount of help."

## US, Russia set for talks on missile shield

AFP, Washington

Experts from the United States and Russia are to meet Monday to evaluate Moscow's proposal for a joint anti-missile base to counter a planned US missile shield based in Poland and the Czech Republic.

The talks would also cover the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, a key European arms control accord from which Russia withdrew recently, US officials said.

"We hope that the meeting would be productive and Russia and the US can agree to some serious cooperation on missile defense against common threats," a US official told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Missile defence certainly occupies a large part of the agenda but the CFE treaty would also be discussed," the official said.

The talks among the technical experts are the first since US President George W. Bush agreed to study the missile shield plan first raised by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G8 summit in Germany last month.

Bush had called for a joint panel of experts to look into the issue.

The United States insists the shield it wants based in Poland and the Czech Republic is aimed at knocking out the threat from nations such as Iran and North Korea.

## 16 Indian pilgrims drown

AFP, New Delhi

Singh told the Press Trust of India news agency.

Sixteen people, including several women and children, drowned in the Ganges river near the banks of the holy Hindu city of Varanasi when an overloaded boat of pilgrims capsized, police said.

Police have detained the owner of the boat, the report said.

Many Hindus visit the city of Varanasi to bathe in the waters of the Ganges, which is believed to wash away sins.

## Kashmir tourist bus blast toll rises to seven

AFP, Srinagar

The death toll from a blast inside a tourist bus in Indian Kashmir at the weekend rose to seven yesterday as police said they were still investigating the cause.

"We are awaiting forensic reports," senior police officer Shri Murari Singh told reporters in the state summer capital Srinagar where a blast ripped through the bus on Sunday near the city's scenic Mughal-built gardens.

Singh said six people died on Sunday, including two young girls, while the seventh tourist died in Srinagar's main hospital Monday morning.

The bus was carrying more than 25 passengers, with police saying 19 were injured.

"The cause of explosion is under investigation. We cannot rule out anything," Singh said.

Last year, 15 Indian tourists were killed and more than 70 others wounded in a series of grenade attacks by suspected militants fighting against New Delhi's rule in the divided region. The insurgency has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

This year, one person was killed and 25 others wounded in two attacks on pilgrims headed to a revered Hindu cave shrine in the Himalayas.

Korean FMs to meet in Manila

AFP, Manila

North Korea's new foreign minister will meet his South Korean counterpart in the Philippines this week on the sidelines of a regional security meeting, a South Korean diplomat told AFP.

Pak Ui-Chun and South Korea's Song Min-Soo will both be attending the ASEAN Regional Forum, the main security meeting for Asia-Pacific nations which opens on Wednesday.

"They will meet on Thursday," said the diplomat, who asked not to be named. "It's believed to be their first meeting."



Students of Comilla Medical College form a human chain on the college campus in Comilla yesterday demanding that they be allowed to sit for the first and second professional examinations under July 2007 session.

## 500 dead in China's worst floods: Red Cross

AFP, Geneva

more than 500 people have been killed in some of the most devastating floods to hit China for a decade, the Red Cross said yesterday, launching an emergency appeal for aid to the millions left homeless.

"Over the past two months, more than 200 million people have been affected and over 500 have been killed nationwide by some of the worst flooding to hit the country in the last 10 years," the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said in a statement.

Nearly five million residents have been evacuated from their homes because water levels have risen dangerously high along China's main rivers, while more flash floods, downpours and landslides are expected in the

coming days, the statement said.

High temperatures have made life even more uncomfortable for those displaced.

"There's an urgent need for rice, clean drinking water, shelter, clothing, medical services and disinfectant," said Gu Qinghui, the federation's regional disaster management delegate for East Asia.

"It's the rural poor who are suffering the most, including many farmers," he said, as the Red Cross launched a preliminary emergency appeal for 9.5 million Swiss francs (7.7 million dollars, 5.7 million euros).

The Red Cross warned that it could take months or years for the poorest communities to rebuild and recover.

"When you look at the economic growth of the country, it's easy to forget that outside of the major cities, the rural areas are home to many families living in utter poverty," said Ewa Eriksson, the federation's acting regional head of delegation in Beijing.

"We don't want this disaster to become forgotten or neglected because the world's attention is elsewhere, or because there's a perception that help isn't required, because hundreds of thousands of people are in desperate need of assistance," Eriksson said.

China's death toll from natural disasters this year topped 700 by mid-July, with about half the fatalities coming this month in flood-related disasters, according to state press.

In 2005 more than 1,000 people were killed in China's annual flood season, while in 1998, 4,185 people lost their lives in the deadliest rainy season of the past decade.



Rickshaw pullers struggle to negotiate a waterlogged road inside the DND embankment in the city yesterday. The area remains waterlogged due to torrential rain for the last several days, but no steps have been taken to pump stagnant water out of the area.