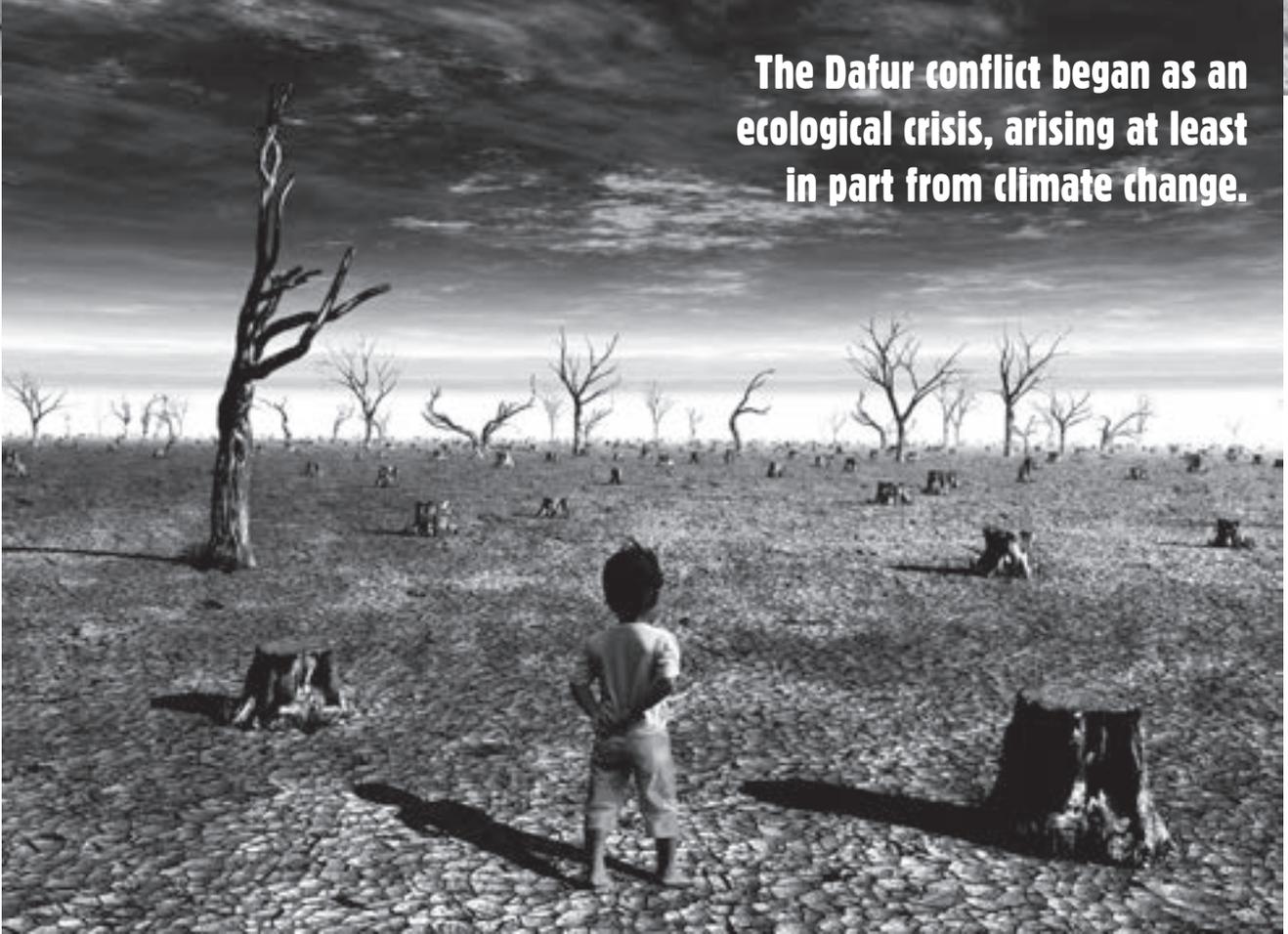


The Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change.



AVERTING A CLIMATE OF CONFLICT

It is no secret that wars are fought over competition for resources. So when the resources that are most critical for human survival – food and water – begin to diminish, we can expect to see more war. By EMMA PITTAWAY

Climate change is demonstrating on a global scale what we have known for decades: that environmental degradation and human wellbeing cannot be separated. When warmer temperatures trigger ecological crises it should come as no surprise that the result is social breakdown and violence.

The link is already being observed. In Darfur, Nigeria, and parts of Asia and South America, long-held tribal tensions are being brought to critical points because of empty rivers, arid lands and dwindling food supplies.

And this is just a taste of what's to come. According to the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), changes in climate are expected to have major negative consequences

on food production in many parts of the world. Shifts in rainfall patterns will accelerate erosion and desertification and render land infertile; sea-level increases will inundate farmlands and disrupt fish populations; extreme weather events will disturb agricultural processes; and increased temperatures will accelerate grain sterility. Water will become increasingly scarce and disease will spread.

These projections alert us to the dire consequences of ignoring the threat of global warming. But the current effects of climate change on social and political instability are already providing us with a glimpse of the potential human toll. Never mind new definitions of climate refugees, global warming is already exacerbating existing refugee crises.

DARFUR: CLIMATE-INDUCED CONFLICT

One of the first links made between climate change and intensified conflict was in Darfur. A 2007 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)¹ recognises the erosion of natural resources caused by climate change as among the root causes of Darfur's social strife and conflict. Even UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has acknowledged that "the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change."²

According to the UNEP report, unprecedented rainfall reduction in Northern Darfur has turned millions of hectares of already marginal semi-desert grazing land into desert. Desertification has threatened the livelihoods of pastoralist societies, causing severe, prolonged droughts over several decades, and instances of localised famine. Since 2003 this has resulted in widespread displacement in the region, as the Arab pastoralists have been forced south to find pasture, encroaching on the land of African farmers and sparking violent conflict.

It is overly simplistic to attribute armed conflict to any single cause like climate change. In the Darfur crisis, like all others, there are various contributing factors: ethnic and political tensions, tribal and clan divisions, poor governance and economic influences. What is different about Darfur is that it showed the world for the first time how climate-related factors can push existing tensions beyond the tipping point into violent conflict, affecting not only localised communities but also the region and the international community at large.

A GLOBAL TREND

Similar trends are being observed in other parts of Africa and the world. All countries in the Sahel belt – which has suffered ongoing drought and localised famine – are experiencing similar patterns as climate-induced desertification leads to displaced populations and ethnic conflict. The UN Special adviser on conflict, Jan Egeland, has recently visited the area, and recognises the "very clear link between climate induced resource competition and conflict."³

Parts of the Middle East, Central Asia and South America are likewise already

facing societal stress due to climate change, making them more vulnerable to conflict. Tibet's vast glaciers create the world's greatest river system, which provides a lifeline to 47% of the world's population residing in South and Central Asia. Due to climate change and environmental degradation, a cycle of chronic flooding and droughts is already creating water scarcity in the region. The potential consequences are unimaginably serious if global warming causes the melting and disappearance of the Himalayan glaciers as predicted. Intrastate water-sharing disputes have become rife in several Asian countries – from India and Pakistan to Southeast Asia and China – and the potential of greatly escalated conflict over river-water resources now looms just over the horizon.

The trend of climate-induced resource scarcity leading to violent conflict is only beginning to be mapped, but it holds important lessons for humanity. It shows us how global warming is already affecting our world, and what we can expect to come. Climate change is acting like a 'stress multiplier', amplifying existing social tensions and creating new ones. It has the potential to cause heightened competition over resources; the displacement of populations and regional instability; and economic shocks leading to unemployment and violence.

The main lesson here is the importance of averting a disastrous global warming scenario. The contribution of climate change to current regional and ethnic conflicts is like stress cracks appearing before the real flood of climate-related refugees begins. As well as those areas where impacts are already being seen, resource conflicts are predicted to flourish in the former Soviet Union, the Niger Delta, the Nile Basin, the Indonesian archipelago and the vast watersheds of the Himalayas and the Andes. In what's referred to as a 'cascading effect', resource-stressed societies will be less likely to withstand other climate change fallout, such as intensifying natural disasters, economic depression, and people movement. Hundreds of millions of people will become refugees

as their ecological and socio-political systems collapse. Climate change has the potential to create the biggest social and political destabilisation humanity has ever witnessed.

TIME TO ACT

Australia, as the highest per capita emitter of greenhouse gases and one of the leading refugee resettlement countries, is perfectly placed to play a leading role in averting these looming humanitarian

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disasters. Ratifying the Kyoto Protocol was a symbolic first step for the Rudd Government, but the real test will be whether the Government takes a leadership position in critical global climate negotiations in Copenhagen at the end of 2009. The world still has a chance to avoid the worst projections of melting glaciers, arid farmlands and flooded deltas, but it depends on developed nations like Australia committing to reduce their carbon emissions by the range recommended by IPCC science – 25-40% by 2020. If they back down from this commitment when they meet in Copenhagen they'll be blowing the chance of securing a global agreement to address climate change.

Time to tackle climate change is running out. If the international community fails in Copenhagen we will start to see food scarcity, water scarcity and violent conflict dramatically on the rise. And with decreasing habitable land and dwindling natural resources, the world will have to shelter hundreds of millions of new refugees. ■

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¹ Sudan Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment, UNEP, 2007

² The Washington Post, 16th June 2007

³ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, www.irinnews.org