

Climate Change and Conflict



Climate change and war are intimately related. Future generations will ask us: “What did you do to diminish climate change by trying to stop the invasion of Iraq? What did you do to prevent the terrible effects of climate change such as rising sea levels, desertification, drought, cyclones and the collapse of vulnerable societies?” No longer can these be called ‘acts of God’. They must be called by their true name: ‘acts of people’. Working for peace is integral to overcoming climate change – and peace movements and environmental groups need to work together.

Scientists attending the United Nations conference on climate change in Bali in 2007 warned that unless greenhouse gas emissions were contained, extreme geo-climatic events are to be expected. ¹ The conference issued a declaration stating that coastal settlements, urban conglomerations and ecosystems are at risk, and that several plant and animal species even face extinction.²

Professor Richard Somerville of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, a signatory to the declarations, said “Climate science continues to say that environmental changes are occurring faster than even the best climate models have projected. [We] must start the process of reaching a new global agreement that sets strong binding targets and includes the vast majority of the nations of the world.”

The global community is already acknowledging the impact of climate change: floods, cyclones, devastating forest fires, melting ice caps and the resultant increase in refugees and environmentally displaced people, great poverty due to pressures on resources, and animal and plant life facing extinction. At the same time, the USA and Israel are dominating the media with their intention to prevent Iran from developing nuclear expertise. It is alarming that in the face of serious threat to the existence of humanity and creation posed by climate change, priority is given to the issue of Iran’s nuclear expertise.

¹ Imelda Abano, ‘Cut GhGs Or Face Extreme Events – Scientists’, *Inter Press Service* 07 December, 2007

² Ibid

Advances in armament technology and the invention of nuclear weapons have resulted not only in unimaginable casualties but long term - often irreparable - damage to the environment. Historically, there has been little awareness of the effects of war on the earth. Carpet bombing of German cities, use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, use of defoliants and other chemicals in the Vietnam War, and use of depleted uranium in both Gulf Wars are clear examples of the misery and havoc caused by military technology. Even in 'peace time' many are unaware of the damage to the environment caused by 'war games' engaged in by Australia and its allies as they prepare for war. This begs the question: does our earth have the capacity to face another war involving nuclear weapons?³

It is time for leaders of nations to see their national interests as connected with the interests of people on the other side of the globe. What we do affects people we have never seen, spoken to or heard of. We have reached the point where human existence as a whole is at stake and our destiny is inextricably linked. If we are to overcome this crisis of climate change we need to think beyond the confines of national states. ⁴

Humanity has to replace fragmentation, selfishness, competition and antagonism with noble values of unity, cooperation, compassion and mutual understanding.⁵ We need to move beyond egocentrism and consumerism, materialistic competition and over-exploitation of natural resources. This begins by overcoming the tendency to 'other' people and groups.

Peace and Climate Change

Working for peace is crucial if we are to overcome climate change, and peace movements need to cooperate with environmental groups. This was acknowledged by 2007 Nobel Peace Prize recipients Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in comments that it is futile to counter climate change by searching for alternative sources of energy and reducing carbon emissions, without also striving for peace. The 2007 United Nations Climate Conference in Bali offered some proposals towards ensuring peace and justice.

1. There will be no clear winners or losers in future wars. All will lose because all will have to face the aggravated climate change situation. This should be borne in mind with regard to Iran.
2. Long-running issues and crises (such as the Israel/Palestine conflict) need to be settled peacefully through dialogue and involvement of all concerned parties.

³ Abdul Basit, 'Wars and Climate Change: National Interests versus Global Emergency', **Countercurrents.org** 05 December, 2007

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

3. Justice, security and respect for the fundamental rights of all nations must be guaranteed.
4. We realise that greater losses have been suffered through natural disasters than the so-called war on terrorism.
5. We need to encourage understanding and cooperation between different nations and religions by stressing that human unity is essential for our survival.

A report by the International Food Policy Research Institute [IFPRI] found that peace is compromised when the livelihood of the poorest people in the world is threatened by rising food prices, mass production of bio-fuels and globalisation⁶. The director general of IFPRI, Joachim von Braun, said 'Surging demand for feed, food, and fuel have recently led to drastic price increases, which are not likely to fall in the foreseeable future'. Food prices will be affected by diminished production of food products and temperature increases. Production of crop-based bio-fuels may also have dramatic effects on food supply and thus food prices.⁷ As bio-fuels become more profitable, land, water, and capital will be diverted to their production. This will result in more trade-offs between food and fuel. This is evidenced in the amount of maize in the USA used for ethanol production, which has increased by 250% between 2000 and 2006.⁸

The IFPRI Report shows that with many factors threatening the world's food supply and demand, immediate action is needed in the areas of international development and global trade policy in order to avert what could be a dramatic hunger crisis.⁹

Iraq

The invasion of Iraq is closely associated with the failure to address climate change. Clearly the USA is the world's leading producer of 'climate-altering greenhouse gases' yet has failed to show leadership in solving the climate change problem, particularly in the way it has become embroiled in a long-running and costly war.¹⁰

In his memoirs, *The Age of Turbulence*, former Federal Reserve chief Alan Greenspan, said 'I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil.'¹¹ Reliance on oil has accounted for the great share of greenhouse gas emissions on the part of the USA. That reliance has also resulted

⁶ "The World Food Situation: New driving Forces and Required Actions" cited in Abra Pollock, 'Food Prices Climbing, With No End in Sight', *Inter Press Service*, 07 December, 2007

⁷ Abra Pollock, 'Food Prices Climbing, With No End in Sight', *Inter Press Service*, 07 December, 2007

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Michael T. Klare, 'Iraq and Climate Change', *Foreign Policy in Focus* December 7, 2007

¹¹ Ibid

in a war that further contributes to climate change. The considerable funds directed to the war effort have meant that there are now fewer resources available to address climate change.

According to the latest Department of Energy figures, petroleum products accounted for 41% of total U.S. energy supplies in 2005, compared to 23% each for coal and natural gas. Even with all the emphasis being placed on the development of renewable sources of energy, oil is expected to remain the dominant source of the nation's energy in 2030, accounting for an estimated 40% of the total supply. And because oil provides so much of our energy, it also produces so much of our carbon dioxide emissions.¹²

Climate change and probable international conflict

With predictions that climate change will cause shortages of fresh water, crop failures and more extreme weather, is it improbable that global warming could spark future wars?¹³

Many strategic analysts are turning their minds to how climate change may create future competition between countries. The mass migration of people is likely to be a major issue. Australian Federal Police Commissioner, Mick Keelty, referring to the the Asia-Pacific region and climate change warned that people 'in their millions....could begin to look for new land, and they'll cross oceans and borders to do it'.¹⁴ Tension will ensue as climate change impacts on countries causing people to move and efforts by governments to prevent that movement, not to mention new and growing markets for people to engage in the lucrative trade of people smuggling. In our region countries at risk include Tuvalu, Bangladesh, Kiribati, parts of Papua New Guinea and the Torres Strait.

Change needed

Australians are not immune from the problems of climate change. Mass movement of people, and the scramble for land, food, production and water will be part of this vicious cycle of climate change and conflict.

To reduce the impact of climate change a total transformation is needed in the way cities, industries, farms, and transportation systems are organised and powered. This requires full attention, imagination, ingenuity, and determination on the part of leaders, scientists, engineers, farmers, and industrialists.¹⁵ Yet individuals can play their part,

¹² Ibid

¹³ Daniel Flitton, 'Climate change brings a potential for conflict between nations' *The Age*, December 18, 2007

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

too: by working together for peace, we can help to prevent climate change through conflict.