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## War Talk and Climate Change

By Betsy Hartmann

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The beat is on. From the Norwegian Nobel Committee to the UN Security Council, from environmental NGOs to the Pentagon, climate change is now proclaimed as a serious threat to national and international security. Pundits warn it could lead to violent conflict over scarce environmental resources, mass migrations of poor, unruly 'climate refugees,' and even wars between states. It is already happening in Darfur, they tell us, and the rest of Africa could soon follow suit.

I, too, am worried about the effects of climate change, particularly on the planet's poorest and most vulnerable people. In some locations, environmental changes due to global warming will no doubt exacerbate already existing economic and political tensions, but the current threat scenarios being bandied about are wildly speculative. As a recent study by Norwegian peace researchers Nordas and Gleditsch points out, "the security threat from climate change has been presented in public debate in increasingly flamboyant wording, largely based on secondary and politicized sources."

These climate scare stories ignore the ways many poorly resourced communities manage their affairs without recourse to violence. Violent conflict in the Global South is generally more connected to resource abundance (competition over rich mineral reserves in the Congo or diamonds in Sierra Leone) than resource scarcity. Moreover, people and nations are as capable of cooperating as they are prone to fighting. The 1990s specter of violent water wars never materialized because of diplomacy and water-sharing agreements. Despite grandiose claims that hundreds of millions of 'climate refugees' will roam the planet, we simply don't know how many people global warming will displace. So much will depend on how effectively the international community rises to the challenge of reducing poor people's vulnerability to drought, storms, floods and sea-level rise, and implements strong disaster-response strategies.

Above all, the nature of institutions and power structures at the local, regional, national and international levels determines whether conflict over resources turns violent or not. Blaming the deaths in Darfur on drought and land degradation caused by climate change naturalizes profoundly political forces. Sudan is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with wealth and power concentrated in the capital Khartoum. Government agricultural policies that stole land from small peasants and redistributed it to large mechanized farms not only triggered political and ethnic grievances in Darfur, but caused ecological damage. It is to history and human agency we should look to understand the roots of crises like Darfur, not to a weather map.

Why are climate change threat scenarios taking hold when there is so little credible evidence to support them? It is one of the oldest games in town to dress up issues as dangerous security threats to garner media attention, funding and political support. The climate change case is no exception. In Washington, DC, environmental lobbyists are linking climate change to national security in order to persuade conservative members of Congress to pass legislation capping carbon emissions. In the UK, Christian Aid is drumming up fear of a new "human tide" of climate refugees creating "a world of many more Darfurs" in order to raise money for its development projects. Presumably, the Nobel committee needed a reason - the threat of war - to justify giving Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change the peace prize for their work on global warming.

Those who pursue such strategies usually claim they are simply being pragmatic in the service of worthy goals, but their appeals to fear and security have negative consequences. They buttress and expand national security agendas while undermining the role of civilian institutions seeking practicable, democratic solutions. And intentionally or not, they reinforce racial stereotypes.

Take the notion of climate refugees. The image drawn is not of rich, white landowners losing their beachfront property, but of poor, dark people swarming toward our borders. A 2003 Pentagon-sponsored Abrupt Climate Change Scenario warned of the need to strengthen US defenses against "unwanted starving immigrants" from the Caribbean, Mexico and South America. Fomenting fear of climate refugees adds fuel to the fire of the anti-immigrant backlash in both the US and Fortress Europe. In January 2007, the Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg, Brown and Root won a contract from the US government to augment existing immigration detention and removal facilities "in the event of an emergency influx of immigrants into the US."

The term climate refugee is also wantonly applied to poor African-Americans internally displaced by Hurricane Katrina. "The first massive movement of climate refugees has been that of people away from the Gulf Coast of the United States," stated environmentalist Lester Brown, director of the Earth Policy Institute, in 2006. Even if we knew - which we don't - that Katrina was definitively caused by climate change, would it make sense to describe evacuees in such a manner? The extent of the disaster in New Orleans had much more to do with racial inequality and government incompetence than the strength of Katrina's winds.

Equally worrying, climate change war talk gives the US military added justification for overseas interventions, especially in Africa. American defense officials are currently citing the threat of climate-induced disorder and terrorism to legitimize the establishment of AFRICOM, the Bush administration's controversial new regional military command for Africa. The CNA defense think tank's influential 2007 report, "National Security and the Threat of Climate Change," emphasizes how resource scarcity, environmental degradation and climate change are likely to trigger violent conflict in Africa. According to its recommendations:

Some of the nations predicted to be most affected by climate change are those with the least capacity to adapt or cope. This is especially true in Africa, which is becoming an increasingly important source of US oil and gas imports. Already suffering tension

and stress resulting from weak governance and thin margins of survival due to food and water shortages, Africa would be yet further challenged by climate change. The proposal by the Department of Defense (DOD) to establish a new Africa Command reflects Africa's emerging strategic importance to the US, and with humanitarian catastrophes already occurring, a worsening of conditions could prompt further US military engagement.

Concern is also rising that the (DOD) may invest in expensive and risky technological schemes to control the climate. The Pentagon's Abrupt Climate Change Scenario, for example, recommended the DOD "explore geo-engineering options that control the climate." A far better approach would be for the military to clean up its own act. The DOD is the largest single consumer of fuel in the US, and the present war in Iraq is not only wasting lives, but millions of gallons of oil daily.

In the climate change arena, the appeal to the "high politics" of national security is low politics. It demonizes the people who have the least responsibility for global warming, turning them into a dangerous threat. Solutions to the urgent problem of climate change lie not in beating the war drums, but in taking responsibility for our own actions and working together across borders, in peace.

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