

Destroying the global environment

by Bharat H. Desai

Our only abode — the earth — is in danger. In the process of evolution, a stage has now been reached when the boom of science and technology has enabled man to transform his environment. The human quest for development seriously threatens our fragile ecosystem. Most of our present day environmental difficulties can be said to originate from man's "ecological misbehavior."

Much of the development in the world today is not sustainable. It is based upon the squandering of our "biological capital" — soil, forests, animals, plant species, water and air. Even many of our economic, monetary and trade policies in sectors such as energy, agriculture, forestry and human settlements tend to induce and reinforce non-sustainable development patterns and practices. In the past decade-and-a-half most of the developing countries have seen a steady increase in environmental degradation and many have experienced massive environmental deterioration, following sudden industrialization and explosive urbanization. In contrast, the capacity of a number of developing countries to manage their environment, so as to secure the wellbeing of their people, is also coming under severe stress from rapid population growth, its uneven distribution and from inadequate socio-economic development.

Environmental refugees

The ecological decline has often been seen as a significant causal factor in economic, social and political unrest as well. There are the growing migrations of "environmental refugees," and the social collapse of exploding settlements. The environmental deterioration and its snowballing effects — erosion of quality of life, lack of development and increasing poverty — generates those environmental refugees. These are the people forced to abandon their natural habitat, which can no longer sustain them, to seek a better life or mere survival elsewhere. The millions of people fleeing the droughts in Africa, the victims of the Bhopal gas disaster and the thousands made homeless by the earthquake in Mexico fall in this category. In the post-Second World War period, the definition of refugees as merely "persecuted individuals" has been widened by the United Nations to embrace a whole group of people fleeing from "dangerous circumstances." Drought and desertification figure prominently among the causes that uproot large numbers of people. It happened in North America's Great Plains region in the Thirties, when hundreds of thousands of American farmers, seeing their lives being blown away in huge clouds of dust, abandoned their dying land and migrated to the richer farmlands of California.

Because of growing environmental deterioration, it appears that we are now gradually heading towards a world with far less capacity to feed an ever-increasing population — turning more and more hapless people into environmental refugees. This tragic phenomenon takes its toll first among the poorer developing countries, worsening their plight still further. But next century it will bring the biggest challenge to the environment. As Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Chairperson of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and present Prime Minister of Norway, candidly put it, "With the deepening environmental crisis in many parts of the world, environmental degradation could become a serious threat to peace in future, with even military means employed to deal with the non-military (environmental) challenges to security."

Stockholm Conference

The first global effort to diagnose the state of environment was the United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. The Stockholm Conference expressed deep concern for the deteriorating environment and the urgent need to halt this relentless process. "In the long and tortuous evolution of the human race on this planet, a stage has been reached when, through the rapid acceleration of science and technology, man has acquired the power to transform his environment in countless ways and on an unprecedented scale. Both aspects of man's environment — the natural and the man-made — are essential to his wellbeing and to the enjoyment of basic human rights, even the right to life itself," the Stockholm Declaration said.

Environment protection was earlier seen by many developing nations, including India, somehow as a goal conflicting with developmental priorities. Industrialized nations' recommendations that the developing nations adopt environmental protection policies was even regarded by some of them as a trap, as a way of discouraging them from pursuing their own economic development. Giving expression to this feeling, in her address at the Stockholm Conference, the late Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi asked: "How can we speak to those who live in villages and in slums about keeping the oceans, rivers and the air clean when their own lives are contaminated at the

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