

Climate change seen as “security threat” by UN Security Council, US military experts

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On April 17, the United Nations Security Council held its first-ever discussion on climate change as a serious threat to security and future political stability. In addition to the 15 council member states in attendance, 38 other UN member countries sent representatives to speak. Although no action was taken at the meeting’s conclusion, its very convocation reveals growing uneasiness within the world’s ruling powers about social unrest that would come with global warming.

British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett, president of the Security Council, introduced the topic with the warning, “The Security Council is the forum to discuss issues that threaten the peace and security of the international community. What makes wars start? Fights over water. Changing patterns of rainfall. Fights over food production, land use,” she said. “There are few greater potential threats to our economies ... but also to peace and security itself.”

Citing the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) findings, Beckett outlined the potential for increased famines, floods, and disease outbreaks leading to mass migration; increased competition over food, arable land, water, and energy; and profound economic crises.

The widely accepted scientific projections are grave. The poorest populations will suffer earliest and worst. Many are already struggling to cope with extreme climates with little governmental support. Populations in the Indian subcontinent, China, and the Andes region of South America are particularly vulnerable to the melting of glaciers that serve as regional water supplies. Such melting will result in increased flooding, and, ultimately, extreme water shortages. Declining crop yields across the already hot and dry African continent could leave hundreds of millions without the means to produce food. Coastal populations throughout Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific, as well as in large cities such as New York, London, Cairo and Tokyo, are considered vulnerable to permanent displacement by the middle of the century.

Without elaborating on these potential human catastrophes, Beckett alluded to the UK Treasury’s recent Stern Review Report on the Economics of Climate Change,

which warned that climate change would almost certainly cause global economic convulsions “on a scale similar to those associated with the great wars and the economic depression of the first half of the 20th century.” “That alone will inevitably have an impact on the security of all of us—developed and developing countries alike,” she said. Most UN member countries were in agreement that this presented significant risks to political and economic stability.

However, this assessment also met with predictable resistance. Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin insisted that the topic of climate change did not belong in the Security Council. Pakistani ambassador Farukh Amil, representing the Group of 77 developing nations, declared that to entertain the issue of climate change not only “infringes” on the authority of the UN but also “compromises the rights of the general membership of the United Nations.”

Venezuelan ambassador Pui Leong agreed, remarking that “the subject of energy is an area falling strictly under the sovereignty of states as part of their national development policies ... every country, on the basis of its sovereignty, has the authority to decide on the use of its natural resources and to set its own environmental and energy policy.”

US ambassador Alejandro Wolff embellished this point by praising the Bush administration’s energy policy, including its \$5 billion in voluntary business tax incentives and \$1.65 billion in tax credits supposedly aimed at reducing emissions. Fully a quarter of the world’s annual heat-trapping emissions are produced by the US.

According to a UN summary of the discussion, Wolff said that the most effective management strategy to allow states to prepare for threats to “security and stability” was to promote methods that “focus on education, rule of law, human freedom and economic opportunity.” In other words, the US answer to climate change is to implement ineffective tax breaks for corporations in the US, while supporting capitalist development in other countries. This would somehow create the resources necessary for addressing climate change.

Wolff declared that the US had a “long history of extending help so that people could live in democratic societies with robust economies and strong and stable governments.” This, presumably, includes the US invasion of Iraq, aimed at seizing control of the country’s oil resources.

The debate over climate change and global warming management at the UN is a struggle among the national ruling establishments for their own interests on the international diplomatic stage. While there is concern that climate change can have unforeseen political and economic consequences, these competing capitalist states have no means of seriously addressing the issue, other than making preparations for cracking down on social unrest.

The US, for its part, defends the short-term interests of its ruling elite by seizing natural and energy resources through both privatization and war, and by consistently refusing to acknowledge international protocols. Tensions among nations have grown over the non-compliance of the US and other major polluters to international climate treaties following the release of the Independent Panel on Climate Change report.

While the Bush administration has done everything it can to prevent any serious discussion of global warming, sections of the political and military establishment are planning for the consequences of this warming and are developing military strategies to deal with it. In a new report released one day before the Security Council meeting, US military experts described the dire situation facing world powers.

Drawing upon peer-reviewed climate studies, the report warns that within three to four decades, climate change will spawn wars over water, increasing famine and disease outbreaks, inundation of populous coastal cities, and mass human migration. “The chaos that results can be an incubator of civil strife, genocide and the growth of terrorism,” it states, urging US military preparedness.

The report, *National Security and the Threat of Climate Change*, was undertaken by the government-funded national security think tank, the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), and co-authored by a military advisory board comprised of retired top-level brass, including six Navy admirals and five generals.

While not commissioned by the Bush administration or the Pentagon, some of the authors, who have close ties to officials in the Defense Department, said several branches of the military are now scrutinizing the problems posed by climate change.

The sobering and urgent tone of the report is noteworthy. Some strategists see stonewalling of climate data in the interests of oil companies as extremely reckless in its

shortsightedness. The more far-sighted layers of the political establishment recognize that the short-term profits gained from current policy are being made at the expense of long-term profit and future US hegemony.

In particular, military experts are concerned that the potential scale of catastrophe could trigger revolution and political upheaval. “Many developing nations do not have the government and social infrastructures in place to cope with the type of stressors that could be brought about by global climate change,” the report states. “When a government can no longer deliver services to its people, ensure domestic order, and protect the nation’s borders from invasion, conditions are ripe for turmoil, extremism and terrorism to fill the vacuum.”

While developing nation states with large populations are seen as especially vulnerable to such social unrest, the report also notes that all regions of the world may experience profound upheavals, including the developed countries of Europe. The report advocates bolstering US military bases and key allied governments in unstable regions of the world.

Like the multitude of scientific studies on climate change that have been published recently, the report projects that disease, droughts and flooding will make regions already crippled by humanitarian crises, such as the Middle East, Asia and Africa, more unstable. Mass migration from coastal and poor regions into richer countries is seen as a likely result, exacerbating social strife. Such a development could enable reactionary governmental appeals to nationalism and xenophobia and lead to conflagrations throughout Europe and North America.

Transcripts of the UN Security Council meeting on climate change can be found here:
<http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/scact2007.htm>

The full CNA report can be downloaded in PDF at the following link: <http://securityandclimate.cna.org/report/>



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