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Africa: Climate Change Could Increase Conflict in Continent

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Darfur just may be the tip of the melting iceberg. A new study suggests that if world leaders fail to reach a meaningful agreement in Copenhagen to curb climate change, Africa will be ravaged by more wars and corpses in the coming decades. 'If the sub-Saharan climate continues to warm and little is done to help its countries better adapt to high temperatures, the human costs are likely to be staggering,' said UC-Berkeley's Marshall Burke, the study's lead author.

The study, 'Warming increases the risk of civil war in Africa,' published online last week by Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), states that there are 'strong historical linkages between civil war and temperature in Africa, with warmer years leading to significant increases in the likelihood of war.' Using climate model projections it estimates a 'roughly 54 per cent increase in armed conflict incidence by 2030, or an additional 393,000 battle deaths if future wars are as deadly as recent wars.' The study, which uses data between 1981-2002, shows that a 1 degree Celsius increase in temperature 'represents a remarkable 49 per cent increase in the incidence of civil war.'

'We were definitely surprised that the linkages between temperature and recent conflict were so strong,' said co-author Edward Miguel, professor of economics at UC-Berkeley and faculty director of UC-Berkeley's Center for Evaluation for Global Action. 'But the result makes sense. The large majority of the poor in most African countries depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, and their crops are quite sensitive to small changes in temperature. So when temperatures rise, the livelihoods of many in Africa suffer greatly, and the disadvantaged become more likely to take up arms.'

The study comes on the heels of statements by scientists from the Global Carbon Project that if we don't drastically reduce our carbon emissions the world is on course for a 6 degrees Celsius increase in temperature by the end of the century. Of course if this doomsday scenario comes to fruition we won't have to worry about wars in Africa - the human race, along with all other forms of life, will be nearly wiped off the face of the earth.

While the study focused solely on temperature change, experts have argued that other climate change factors, such as changes in precipitation levels, water scarcity, lack of arable land and migration are also contributing to conflicts. The Los Angeles Times published an article appropriately asking: 'Have the climate wars of Africa begun?'. The article examines recent tribal fighting in Kenya over water and pastures, which the UN believes is responsible for at least 400 deaths this year. Libya, another war torn country, is dealing with longer rainy seasons, rising sea levels and increases in flooding. Climate change is also believed to be a contributing factor in the escalation of violence in Darfur. Writing in The Washington Post, Ban Ki Moon, secretary general of the United Nations, noted that 'amid the diverse social and political causes, the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change.'

Another recent study conducted by a group of military experts contracted by the Institute for Environmental Security in The Hague supports the US researchers' claims linking climate change to war.

'Failure to recognise the conflict and instability implications of climate change and to invest in a range of preventive and adaptive actions will be very costly in terms of destabilising nations, causing human suffering, retarding development and providing the required military response,' retired Indian air marshal AK Singh, who chairs the institute's military council, told South Africa's Mail & Guardian Online.

Nana Poku, professor of African Studies at the UK's Bradford University, told the BBC that the US-based study makes the case for 'climate debt', an idea growing in popularity around the world 'that rich countries should pay reparations to poor countries for the climate crisis.'

'I think it strengthens the argument for ensuring we compensate the developing world for climate change, especially Africa, and to begin looking at how we link environmental issues to governance,' said Poku. 'If the argument is that the trend towards rising temperatures will increase conflict, then yes we need to do something around climate change, but more fundamentally we need to resolve the conflicts in the first place.'

Cyril Mychalejko is an editor at www.UpsideDownWorld.org, an online magazine covering politics and activism in Latin America. He also serves on the board of the Canary Institute.

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