

Weather of Mass Destruction?

The rise of climate change as the “new” security issue

Oli Brown

As I write this, around 15,000 climate campaigners, politicians and journalists are gathering in Bali for another fortnight of the formulaic negotiations, frenetic side-events and convivial networking that have come to characterize the yearly meetings of the members of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). All in support of reaching agreement on a roadmap for progress

towards a successor treaty to the Kyoto protocol, which is due to expire in 2012. The serious backroom politicking on the contours of a possible deal will take place in future meetings; in Poznan in 2008 and Copenhagen in 2009.

Nevertheless, 2007 may still be remembered as a watershed year for the debate on climate change—though probably not a significant one in terms of cutting emissions. Public awareness of the issue has never been higher. Climate change has become the subject of unprecedented international attention, the focus of a dedicated UN Security Council debate in April and the grounds for the Nobel Peace prize shared between Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). And even the most recalcitrant governments (including the Bush administration) are lining up to pronounce upon the importance of prompt action on climate change.

That climate change could feature in both the Nobel Peace prize and at the Security Council would have been unthinkable just five years ago. There has been a sea-change in the way that we talk about “climate change.” Once an environmental issue, then an energy problem, climate change is also being recast as a threat to international peace and security.

So much so that the very language we use to talk about climate change seems itself to have changed. Earlier this year at a meeting of the African Union, Yoweri Museveni, the President of Uganda (ever a man with a knack for the memorable phrase) called greenhouse gas emissions an “act of aggression” by the developed world against the developing and argued



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Climate change will increase the risk of environmental disasters such as flooding in Africa.

for compensation to be paid to the developing world as part of a global package of redistributive justice. Margaret Becket, the former British Foreign Secretary put the challenge succinctly arguing that, “A failing climate means more failing states.”

Partly this is because we’re increasingly realizing that climate change presents a concrete threat to international stability; redrawing maps of rainfall and resources, increasing the burden of disease and natural disaster on fragile states and triggering wide-scale and destabilizing population movements.

But it’s also part of a definite political move to galvanize the climate negotiations with a sense of urgency, to raise climate change to the realm of high politics and to create the political space for serious concessions on greenhouse gas emissions. Environmental ministers don’t make those kinds of decisions, Prime Ministers do.

The extent to which the climate change debate is becoming a debate about security (and in so doing displacing focus on its developmental or environmental consequences) presents both risks and opportunities.

First, the more dire predictions border on scaremongering (climate change campaigners regularly default to worst case scenarios). These risk spreading “climate change fatigue” among the public—a sense of hopelessness and resignation in the face of an unbeatable challenge. Second, dire predictions about coming “climate wars” imply that climate change requires military solutions; to secure by force one’s resources or erect barriers to large-scale migration. But focusing on military response both raises the stakes and draws attention (and donor dollars) away from the very real, and current, development problems that already pose immediate threats to vulnerable societies; extreme poverty, access

to education, HIV/AIDs and so on. Third, the international community needs to ensure that this does not become a northern, donor-driven agenda, perceived as yet another way for northern interests to interfere in southern affairs.

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politicians to do something about reducing emissions and investing (carefully) in adaptation. These are the sort of things that the international community should be doing anyway. So, if hanging the climate change debate on the security hook speeds their implementation, it may yet serve a useful purpose.

Oli Brown is a program manager and policy researcher for International Institute for Sustainable Development’s Trade and Investment, and Security programs.