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## ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT: THE UNDERLYING GLOBAL ISSUES

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### Introduction

There was an intense focus on Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan during the course of February, with the US surge in Baghdad getting under way at the same time as a substantial British withdrawal from Basra was announced. Although the US reinforcements in Baghdad had an immediate effect in curbing criminality, by the end of the month the incidence of mortar attacks and roadside bombs had returned to the previous level. Both US and British military reinforcements are planned for Afghanistan, with a visit from the US Vice-President, Dick Cheney, to the military base at Bagram, outside Kabul at the end of the month, coinciding with a suicide bomb attack on the base. Iran defied a UN Security Council resolution over its uranium enrichment plans, but there were also reports towards the end of the month about internal criticisms of President Ahmedinejad's rhetoric. Meanwhile, US military forces continued to increase in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, with two aircraft carriers battle groups and two amphibious strike groups present in the region for the first time in several years.

Even so, three other immediate issues were relevant – developments in North Africa, Somalia and Thailand, as well as some evidence of an al-Qaida re-grouping in western Pakistan. More generally, though, concern about global security trends that are far more substantive than the immediate 'war on terror' received a substantial boost as a result of two reports on issues that are not normally linked together by analysts – socio-economic divisions and environmental constraints.

### Somalia, Tunisia and Thailand

In January, an internationally-supported Ethiopian force evicted the Islamist movement from power in Mogadishu, Somalia, even though the Islamic Courts group had brought a high degree of order to the capital after years of disorder and chaos. That movement was seen by the United States, in particular, as far too close to international jihadist organisations, and US military forces conducted operations against groups in Somalia said to have links with the al-Qaida movement. These operations included air strikes mounted from an air base in Ethiopia, and Special Force units crossing the borders into southern Somalia from both Kenya and Ethiopia.

Neither of the expectations of the twin operations – evicting the Islamist movement and terminating al-Qaida activity in Somalia – have been fully met. Although US sources cite the disruption of al-Qaida groups, a number of the key leaders have escaped, including two people implicated in the bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. In terms of removing the Islamic Courts group from power, the expectation was that Ethiopian forces would, in due course, be replaced by a peacekeeping force drawn from a number of African countries. This would provide a seamless change while maintaining security, especially in Mogadishu, and allowing the newly installed transitional Somali government to take control.

This has simply not happened. Ethiopian troops have begun to withdraw, not least because the regime in Addis Ababa is only too well aware that the long-term presence in Somalia of troops from what is seen as a Christian country is only too likely to result in a reaction to a foreign occupation. The problem is that those African states that appeared to be willing to provide peacekeeping troops are lacking either in capability or political will, especially as the security situation in Mogadishu is declining sharply. By the end of February there were reports of major clashes between government troops and diverse groups of insurgents in the city, leading to large numbers of refugees leaving for rural villages.

In Tunisia, meanwhile, evidence has emerged of the evolution of radical Islamist paramilitary groups in a country that has been largely regarded as distant from most such problems. In late January there was a major counter-terrorism operation mounted by the authorities that is reported to have disrupted a group planning attacks on the US and British embassies. Although evidence is sparse, the indications are that the Tunisian group formed part of a regional development centred on the Algerian GSPC (an acronym for the French title of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) that claimed responsibility for a series of seven bomb attacks against police stations in eastern Algeria. The GSPC is seen as collaborating with the al-Qaida movement which has itself been revitalised by the withdrawal of most Pakistani army units from some key border areas adjoining Afghanistan. Not only is al-Qaida in a position to re-establish training camps, it is now in a position to lay claim to firm links with North African paramilitary groups. Given the frequent transit opportunities between several North African states and southern European states such as Spain, France and Italy, this provides al-Qaida supporters and their associates other links into Europe in addition to the Pakistan/UK link.

In addition to its developing links with groups in North Africa, the al-Qaida movement retains looser connections with the separatist movement in southern Thailand. This has claimed around 2,000 lives in the past three years, and a tough policy of military control that was in place until five months ago had appeared to be largely counter-productive. After a military coup five months ago, a surprising change of policy brought in the possibility of a more conciliatory approach but this has so far failed to have any effect, with separatists maintaining high levels of intimidation and violence. There is therefore a risk that the authorities will return to a more repressive approach. If the conciliation efforts are maintained they will require persistence and some courage, requiring years of effort. The separatist movement has its origins in Thailand's annexation of the southern province with their Islamic majority a century ago, and the repression of recent years will take substantial time to heal.

### Climate Change and Security

Although the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan inevitably cause the greatest immediate concern, the most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), published earlier this year, is a strong reminder that much larger issues of global insecurity cannot be ignored. Furthermore, it has come at a time when there are clear indications of a widening of the global socio-economic divide, with the combination of the two – marginalisation and environmental constraints – likely to be a dominant feature of insecurity over the next few decades if current trends are not reversed.\*

The IPCC report provided a high degree of consensus among participating scientists and their governments and was the strongest international statement so far about the trends and their causes. Although the degree of consensus was impressive, it was made possible by a willingness of many of those involved to accept a wording and an analysis that was safe to the extent that it was almost impossible to refute. The problem with this approach, for all its value, is that it is likely to be an underestimate of the sheer scale of the problem. In particular, it does not fully cover particular trends, involving forms of positive feedback, that are thought by many climate specialists to be highly important.

One of these is the impact of melting sea ice in the Arctic regions, especially in the North East Atlantic. As the sea ice melts, so the loss of the reflective ice to darker seas means that the absorption of solar radiation increases. This in turn leads to a further melting of the ice, speeding up the whole process. A second issue concerns the melting of the permafrost, a phenomenon that is being seen across much of the near-Arctic. Dead vegetation that may have been frozen for many thousands of years is now tending to thaw out and then decompose. In doing so, it releases gaseous products of decomposition including carbon dioxide and methane. The quantities of carbon dioxide, the most common of the greenhouse

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\* For further discussion of this see: Chris Abbott, Paul Rogers and John Sloboda, *Beyond Terror: The Truth About the Real Threats to Our World* (London: Rider, 2007).

gases, may not be huge, but the methane releases could be highly significant, given that methane is a far more effective gas at absorbing solar radiation than carbon dioxide. In global terms, it is apparent that the greatest impact of climate change is currently being felt in polar and near-polar regions. If this process accelerates, partly through permafrost decay, then positive feedback will kick in to further accelerate it.

In security terms, though, one of the major developments in climate change research in recent years has been the recognition that climate change will affect the tropics much more than had previously been anticipated. While the effects will be felt through the increased violence of tropical storms and through sea level rises, the most important will come as a result of changes in rainfall patterns, with a tendency for more rain to fall over the oceans and north/south temperate and polar regions and less over the tropical land masses including Amazonia. Any partial "drying out" of the tropics will have two impacts. In environmental terms there is likely to be a further destruction of tropical rainforests, including the incidence of wildfires, in turn releasing more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In human terms, though, there will be the even more important effect of decreasing the ecological carrying capacity of tropical croplands, on which billions of people depend for food. While richer states may be able to cope, the great majority of southern states will find it very difficult.

#### Socio-economic Divisions

It is in this context that a report from the World Institute for Development Economic Research (WIDER), a part of the United Nations University, is so significant. WIDER's work looks at the global distribution of household wealth and finds that:

"While the richest 10% of the adults of the world own 85% of global household wealth, the bottom half collectively owns barely 1%. Even more strikingly, the average person in the top 10% owns nearly 3,000 times the wealth of the average person in the bottom 10%."  
(*WIDER Angle*, 2/2006, [www.wider.unu.edu](http://www.wider.unu.edu))

There are also remarkable regional variations, with three areas – North America, Europe and the rich Asia-Pacific (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand) – accounting for 88% of household wealth. While it is true that countries such as India and China are experiencing rapid economic growth, the great majority of that growth is concentrated in a minority of the populations of such countries. This does much to explain the often violent social reactions now being experienced in both countries. In India, neo-Maoist Naxalite rebels are now active in a third of states and China has experienced thousands of riots and other expressions of discontent, even if few are covered in the Chinese or the international media.

Current socio-economic divisions are markedly more extreme than forty years ago, with a global elite community of around one billion people enjoying remarkable increases in wealth while the great majority remain on the economic margins. Moreover, this marginalised majority is better educated and more literate than in previous decades and has access to far superior communications. Knowledge of such marginalisation is far greater, leading not to a "revolution of rising expectations" that was a feature of the consumer society of industrialised countries in the 1960s and 1970s, but a potential revolution of frustrated expectations. Although the effects of the divisions may frequently be felt in the increased crime rates of large urban areas, there may also be the evolution of various radical social movements, with the Naxalites and Nepalese Maoist rebels being particular examples.

Beyond that, there is a high expectation of much greater migratory pressures as people seek a higher standard of living in the face of declines in their own economic well-being. Countries in Western Europe, North America and the wealthy parts of the West Pacific are reacting with vigour to what is widely seen as a threat – the term "economic migrant" now becoming almost a term of abuse. Australia's robust

treatment of boat people, the US decision to fence of a large part of the border with Mexico and Southern European resistance to migration from North Africa are all examples of this trend.

The problem is that there is now every sign that climate change, in combination with the widening socio-economic divide, will lead to far greater migratory pressures and more radical social movements, with attempts to curb such developments only likely to make them worse. The scale of the potential problem is immense. Some analyses suggest, for example, that migratory pressures might increase tenfold by the middle of the century, producing social disruption that can simply not be controlled by traditional measures of imposed security.

The alternative will be to develop fundamentally different approaches to security that are essentially sustainable and see the narrowing of the socio-economic divide and the control of climate change as essential features of a new security posture. Indeed, these will need to have a very much higher prominence than traditional reliance on military control. It is an approach to be examined in a forthcoming book from Oxford Research Group, *Beyond Terror: The Truth About the Real Threats to Our World*, to be published in April. Whether the development of the idea of 'sustainable security' can be furthered sufficiently rapidly to make a major difference in the next decade or so remains open to question, but both the WIDER report on wealth and poverty and the new IPCC report on climate change are powerful reminders of the urgent need for such new thinking.

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