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Will climate change lead to conflict and strife?

If I return to the subject of global warming, climate change and environmental decay, all of which, it appears, are interlinked, it is for very good reasons.

The danger to mankind and to animal and plant life from human-induced climate change is far more serious and imminent than suspected before the turn of the century and later evinced in the Kyoto Protocol which much of the world accepted as a necessary step on the road to rehabilitation and perhaps some kind of salvation.

Countries of the OECD -- the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development -- and the former Soviet Union are responsible for much of the deleterious changes to the environment that scientists and others have recorded.

The chief scientist of the World Bank Dr Robert Watson was quite firm on this when he spoke at the World Bank sponsored Carbon Expo held in Cologne, Germany last month which I mentioned two weeks ago.

Of the 30 countries that make up the OECD today (first started in 1960 with 20 member states) 23 are in Europe. Those outside Europe are Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, New Zealand and the United States.

So it is mainly the rich industrialised countries that are to be blamed for inducing and hastening climate change that today threatens the entire globe. They are the countries that mostly had a hand in causing this change that has already begun producing disastrous consequences for both man and nature. But they are not alone.

Despite all the noises made in Cologne by the Chinese delegate about how seriously they take climate change, the environmental damage that is being done to the waters of the River Yangtse and its hinterland on either side in the name of economic development is disastrous. Turning farmlands into deserts is only part of the problem.

Hardly had Carbon Expo at which Dr. Watson drew some frightening scenarios particularly for developing countries concluded when the BBC telecast two revealing programmes on climate change by that intrepid film-maker Sir David Attenborough who, in his younger days, produced some beautiful and highly educative films on animals in their natural habitat.

That was followed a few days later by ITV that aired an interesting investigative piece by Lawrence McGinty who made the disturbing observation that nowhere is climate change more noticeable than in the Maldives, our neighbour.

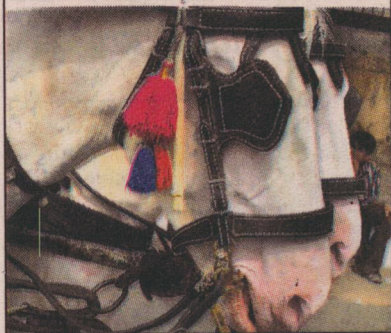
Sir David said that since life began some 4000 million years ago there has been an astonishing variety of animal and plant life.

Now it is all being transformed. "Not by

European Note Book

by Neville de Silva

STOP POLLUTION GREEN CROSS



A placard is placed in the harness of a carriage horse during a rally organized by voluntary organization Green Cross International to mark World Environment Day in Hyderabad, India, on Monday. AP

nature but by one species - man," argued Sir David who admits that not too long ago he was not entirely convinced about man's responsibility for climate change.

But now the accumulation of new evidence and new data has convinced the film maker that climate change is indeed real.

"In every part of the world new climate changes are being recorded."

Indeed they are and that is what is worrying because there are still political leaders who are either unconvinced of the evidence that scientists have produced as proof of the dangers to mankind or think that they would be long gone when disaster strikes and so should do little or nothing to change the environmentally extravagant and hazardous life styles of their peoples.

As David Attenborough said our whole structure of life is built round the burning of fossil fuels.

No wonder President George W Bush refused to endorse the Kyoto Protocol that laid down standards and targets, among other things, that nations should try to achieve in order to reduce greenhouse gases that are largely created by carbon emissions.

Perhaps President Bush genuinely thought all the evidence that proved climate change was happening with such dangerous effects was scientific gobbledegook that seemed to escape him like the escaping carbon dioxide that pollutes the atmosphere.

Or he was more concerned with safeguarding the oil industry and other giant business enterprises in which his family and close associates such as Dick Cheney and

Donald Rumsfeld had or continue to have interests.

Perhaps it would be charitable to say that the former was the case. He did not understand a word of the evidence before him.

Interestingly the BBC and ITV programmes were telecast at a time when the south and some parts of the east of Britain are facing a drought and water cuts have been clamped down for the first time in 16 years reminding one of the days in Sri Lanka.

Whether this is a result of man induced global warming or some natural cycle of climate remains a mystery, certainly to laymen like me. Perhaps it is due to bad management and maintenance of pipelines by water providers such as Thames Water that is responsible for distribution in those areas.

Whatever it is, at least it is making people think about climatic changes and whether individually and severally we could help slow the pace of change, if we cannot halt it.

Even a month after the Carbon Expo at the Kolnmesse, the words of the World Bank's chief scientist still reverberate because his was the most compelling argument why we must act even now to minimise, if not contain, climate change and environmental degradation -- that is if we are not already too late.

Drier areas of the world are getting drier and wetter areas are getting wetter. What does this mean for 1/3 or the world's population of 6.3 billion who are living in water scarce areas?

Climate change is going to exacerbate the problem and one result would be more diseases such as malaria affecting them.

Even worse, if there could be anything worse, is that agricultural productivity will decline in the regions that already suffer from hunger and malnutrition.

Initially, says Dr. Watson, agricultural productivity will show an increase (perhaps giving a false sense of sustainable growth). But even by 2020 there will be a drop in production and by 2080 there would be a definite loss in productivity in the developing countries.

Then comes the dire prediction. "Climate change could lead to conflict, it could lead to strife."

Would these conflicts be intrastate or interstate? Hunger, starvation and lack of water could be compelling reasons for conflict.

We will not be around to see this happen though hunger and thirst are with us even today.

But it is the next generation of mankind that would have to pay for the folly of their ancestors.