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Military Experts Call for Action on Climate Change to Avoid Security Threats

Washington, D.C., October 30, 2009 – Yesterday, a group of serving and retired military officers from around the globe called on governments to “work for an ambitious and equitable international agreement” at the Copenhagen climate negotiations in December. Participants at the conference on “Climate Change and Security at Copenhagen” emphasized the critical importance of addressing climate change now in order to avoid exacerbating current security threats and creating new ones. .

“To avoid conflicts from climate change-related impacts, we need to employ every tool and strategy available, and the military is a critical ally in this fight,” said Durwood Zaelke, President of the Institute for Governance & Sustainable Development and speaker at the conference.

The officers, representing Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the US, are part of an international initiative on Climate Change and the Military led by the Institute for Environmental Security (IES) in The Hague and 10 other think tanks from Asia, Europe and North America.

A key focus of the climate-security effort is the Himalayan-Tibetan Plateau, which was discussed at length in Brussels earlier this month at the officers’ first meeting. This 500,000 km² of snow and ice supplies the dry season irrigation for more than a billion people. It is predicted to shrink to 100,000 km² in 20 years, threatening climate chaos and conflict among dependent countries, including three with nuclear weapons.

Quoting from the military climate statement released at the conference, Air Marshal (ret) AK Singh of India, Chairman of the project’s Military Advisory Council, warned that “failure to recognise the conflict and instability implications of climate change, and to invest in a range of preventative and adaptive actions will be very costly in terms of destabilising nations, causing human suffering, retarding development and providing the required military response.” AK Singh also serves as Project Director, Climate Change & Security, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

Food and water shortages due to climate change threaten to increase conflicts between nations. Inhospitable living conditions from sea level rise and other impacts will contribute to a growing problem of environmental refugees. With the world nearing the tipping points for abrupt climate changes, little time remains before military organizations will be faced with increased challenges.

“We need meaningful action in Copenhagen to address CO₂, but CO₂ is only half the climate problem,” added Zaelke. “We also need to take fast and aggressive action to reduce the other, non-CO₂ half of warming. Reducing black carbon soot, tropospheric ozone, methane, and HFCs, as well as expanding biosequestration through biochar production, are strategies that can help delay abrupt climate change while we wait for reductions in CO₂ to kick in.” Because these non-CO₂ climate change agents are short-lived in the atmosphere compared with CO₂, which can persist for up to 1,000 years, reducing them will produce significant benefits quickly.

A new paper published by Nobel Laureate Mario Molina in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* promotes these fast-action strategies as essential complements to CO₂ reductions. HFCs are one of the major targets. These powerful greenhouse gases, widely used as coolants in air conditioning systems, can be up to 12,000 times more potent than CO₂ and their emissions are growing rapidly. Molina and his co-authors recommend using the Montreal Protocol ozone treaty to phase down the HFCs, and report that this could produce mitigation of up to 100 billion tonnes of CO₂-equivalent or more by 2050 and up to a decade of delay in climate forcing. Every country of the world is Party to the Montreal Protocol and has the opportunity to express its support for an HFC phase-down next week at the treaty’s annual meeting in Egypt.

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