



MEDIA BRIEF

Wars Still Scar West Asia's Environment

Nairobi, 25 October: West Asia has made strides in environmental governance since the 1987 Brundtland report, including establishing environmental institutions, enacting environmental regulations, developing environmental and sustainable development strategies, and joining many multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). Nevertheless, continued population growth, military conflicts, and rapid development have resulted in significant increase in environmental challenges and pressures on natural resources.

The key environmental issues in the region are freshwater scarcity, degradation of land, coastal and marine ecosystems, urban management, and peace and security. Water-borne diseases and the sharing of international water resources are also concerns.

These issues are assessed in the Global Environment Outlook 4, *GEO-4*, the latest in the series of flagship reports from the Nairobi-based United Nations Environment Programme. *GEO-4* is published 20 years after the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) produced its seminal report, *Our Common Future*. *GEO-4* describes the changes since 1987, assesses the current state of global atmosphere, land, water and biodiversity, and identifies priorities for action.

GEO-4 salutes the world's progress in tackling some relatively straightforward problems, with the environment now much closer to mainstream politics everywhere. But despite these advances, there remain the more persistent issues for which existing measures and institutional arrangements have systematically demonstrated inadequacies and where solutions are still emerging. Failure to address these persistent problems, UNEP says, may undo all the achievements so far on the simpler issues, and it may threaten humanity's survival. The report adds - "There are no major issues raised in *Our Common Future* for which the foreseeable trends are favourable." But it insists: "The objective is not to present a dark and gloomy scenario, but an urgent call for action."

GEO-4 says the well-being of billions of people in the developing world is at risk, partly because of a failure to remedy the relatively simple problems which have been successfully tackled elsewhere.

The world as a whole is living far beyond its means. The human population is now so large that "the amount of resources needed to sustain it exceeds what is available... humanity's footprint [its environmental demand] is 21.9 hectares per person while the Earth's biological capacity is, on average, only 15.7 ha/person... "

Sixteen years after the serious environmental damage of the 1990-91 Gulf War ecosystems, especially in Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, still show clear signs of the conflict's effects, and the situation worsened during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The building of military fortifications, the laying and clearing of mines, and the movement of military vehicles and troops caused severe environmental disruption. In the desert they accelerated soil erosion and were linked with dust and sand storms.

Concern persists over the use of depleted uranium munitions in Iraq in both wars, and unexploded ordnance and land mines are still killing civilians years later.

In Lebanon, about 150 000 land mines were sown indiscriminately between 1975 and 1990. There was extensive coastal oil pollution in the 2006 conflict, described by environmentalists as the worst ecological disaster in Lebanese history.

Decades of occupation and neglect have left the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) with a range of serious environmental problems, including the degradation of scarce water resources and pollution by solid and liquid waste.

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Other consequences of the region's wars include disrupted health services, deepened poverty, destroyed institutions and an inability to enforce environmental laws in affected countries. In Iraq non-violent death rates increased in 2005 and 2006, which may reflect deteriorating health services, and increasing environmental threats.

Wars have raised the number of refugees and internally-displaced people in West Asia to about four million people. Dense populations in Gaza have contributed to aquifer depletion, leading to saltwater intrusion and saline water unsuitable for irrigation.

This is the first *GEO* report in which all seven of the world's regions emphasize the potential impacts of climate change. West Asia's energy sector is a primary driver of both economic development and environmental damage. Average CO₂ emissions per head rose from 6 to 7.2 tonnes between 1990 and 2003, compared with a world average of 3.9 tonnes.

The climate change threat is now urgent. To limit the impacts of climate change to a manageable level, some experts have proposed that the global temperature should not exceed an average of 2°C above pre-industrial temperatures. This implies emission reductions of 60–80 per cent by 2050 in developed countries. If developing countries accept emissions reduction commitments, they will need to significantly reduce their emissions.

Negotiations are due to start in December on a treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol, the international climate agreement which obligates countries to control anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Although it exempts all developing countries from emission reduction commitments, there is growing pressure for some rapidly-industrializing countries, now substantial emitters themselves, to agree to emission reductions.

GEO-4 says climate change is a "global priority", demanding political will and leadership. Yet it finds "a remarkable lack of urgency", and a "woefully inadequate" global response.

West Asia is one of the world's most water-stressed regions. In the 20 years from 1985 its overall fresh water availability per head fell from 1 700 to 907 cubic metres a year, and that is expected to decline to 420 m³ a year by 2050.

The health impacts of poor water quality are a major concern in the Mashriq. The main problems are the use of untreated domestic wastewater for irrigation, poor sanitation, and inadequate waste management. Groundwater nitrate contamination is a serious source of illness in infants.

In the past 20 years there has been a 75 per cent population increase in West Asia. Coupled with the intensive use of inappropriate technology, poor regulation of common property resources, ineffective agricultural policies and rapid unplanned urban development, this has meant widespread land-use changes, land degradation and desertification in most of the region's countries.

Wind and water erosion and salinity, and the consequent water-logging of soils, degraded fertility and soil crusting, are the major threats to land productivity and continue to drive land degradation and desertification impacts in the region. At the start of the century 79 per cent of the land was degraded.

Biodiversity is declining in the region's rangelands, and forest degradation is widespread. Several countries have national action plans to combat desertification, but the interaction between land degradation and poverty is routinely ignored, resulting in irrelevant and ineffective policies.

Rapid coastal development is a threat in West Asia. Environmental problems in the coastal and marine area are related to land reclamation, oil pollution, chemical contamination and over-fishing. Dredging has changed coastlines significantly.

There has been intense urbanization in West Asia in the last 20 years. Inadequate urban waste management causes significant health and environmental problems.

Government responses to these challenges have been varied and so far inadequate. Inconsistent and inadequate data collection and monitoring make assessment of urbanization's full impact difficult.

The future will be largely determined by the decisions individuals and society make now, *GEO-4* says: "Our common future depends on our actions today, not tomorrow or some time in the future." A narrow definition of security for some is likely to mean increasing vulnerabilities for all.



For some of the world's persistent problems the damage may already be irreversible. *GEO-4* warns that tackling the underlying causes of environmental pressures often affects the vested interests of powerful groups able to influence policy decisions. The only way to address these harder problems requires moving the environment from the periphery to the core of decision-making: environment *for* development, not development to the detriment of environment.

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Notes to Editors

GEO-4 is produced and published by the Division of Early Warning and Assessment of the United Nations Environment Programme. It is available from www.unep.org/geo/geo4/

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Regional Highlights

West Asia embraces both the Arabian Peninsula, which includes the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Yemen; and the Mashriq, which consists of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and Syria. Most of it is dryland, and water is its most precious resource.

The region has made notable progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on health, education, and the empowerment of women. But 32 per cent of its people are illiterate, and poverty has continued to rise since the 1980s. The GCC countries can achieve the MDGs by 2015, but it is doubtful that the Mashriq and Yemen will do so, and it is impossible for Iraq and the OPT to achieve them.

GCC residents are among the highest per capita water users in the world. Key reasons are the absence of proper demand management and price-signaling mechanisms. There are no incentives to save water.

Over-exploitation of groundwater has caused many natural springs to dry up: this has happened to most of the historical springs in Syria's Palmyra oasis.

The supply-driven approach to water management has not delivered sustainability or security, and most countries have recently moved towards more integrated water management and protection approaches.

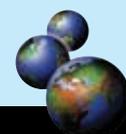
More than 60 per cent of surface water comes from outside the region.

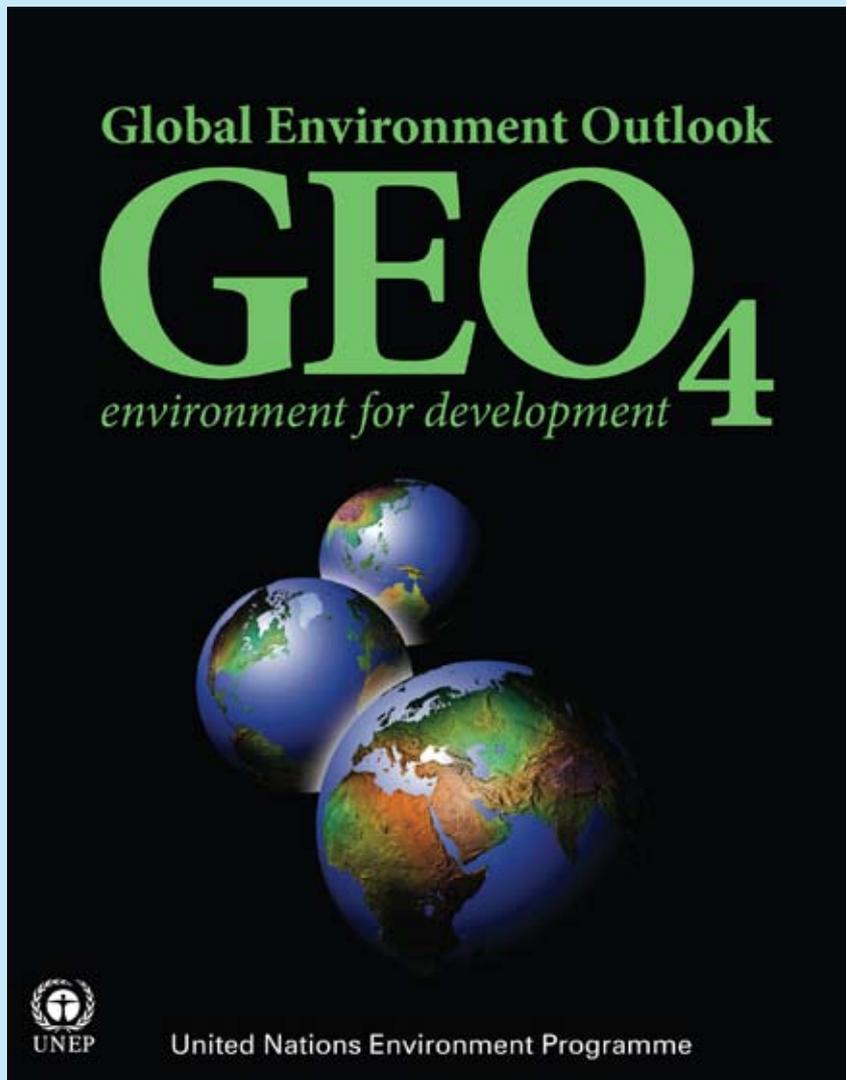
There are efforts to improve degraded lands, but they cover only 2.8 per cent of lands in the Arabian Peninsula and 13.6 per cent of those in the Mashriq.

Over 200 million cubic metres of dredged sediments were used for Jubail Industrial City in Saudi Arabia, 60 million cubic metres of dredged mud and sand for the causeway linking Bahrain to Saudi Arabia, and more than 100 million cubic metres of rock and sand for the Palm Islands in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Oil spills and chemical contamination are other major threats to the region's marine environment, while coastal erosion everywhere continues to be a problem. Coral reef degradation and loss and the fall in the Dead Sea's water level caused by are serious issues.

The total area of protected land increased significantly from 1990 to 1995, but since then has remained the same. But notable conservation measures are the restoration of Iraq's Mesopotamian marshlands and the preservation of local wheat varieties in Jordan and Syria.





The Global Environment Outlook (GEO) is UNEP's flagship assessment process and report series. The fourth report in the series, GEO-4 provides an overview of the global and regional environmental, social and economic state-and-trends over the past two decades. It highlights the interlinkages, challenges and opportunities which the environment provides for development and human well-being. The report also presents an outlook, using four scenarios to explore plausible futures to the year 2050, as well as policy options to address present and emerging environmental issues.

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Copies of the GEO-4 report are available for download on www.unep.org/geo/geo4/ and on
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