

A FOREWARNED FUTURE

As 'climate security' forecast darkens, is Canada ready?

BY MIKE BLANCHFIELD, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

JULY 25, 2009

Thousands of people pour out of Manhattan onto the waiting armada of ships. The "October Surprise" has hit with a vengeance — a massive hurricane has flooded and paralyzed New York City.

Dozens of world leaders watch the disaster unfold beneath them as they are airlifted from the United Nations General Assembly that had just convened on the banks of the now overflowing Hudson River.

"I guess the problem was that we counted on this not happening, at least not yet. Most scientists assumed the worst effects of climate change would occur later in the century," the president of the United States writes in his diary. "The culmination of disasters, needed cleanups, permafrost melting, lower agricultural yields, growing health problems and the like are taking a much terrible toll, much greater than we anticipated 20 years ago."

This presidential diary entry is, of course, fiction. But its inclusion in the 120-page November 2008 report by the National Intelligence Council, a Washington security think-tank, illustrates a grim and troubling reality that is causing worry in such diverse places as the Pentagon and British Defence Ministry, major aid agencies, the United Nations and, of course, among environmentalists.

Real life 21st Century threats due to climate change — massive flooding, droughts, population explosions, massive migrations of uprooted and desperate people facing life-threatening food and water shortages — have made "climate security" a buzzword that now extends far beyond the war rooms of western capitals.

The trepidation is very real that this will be the driver for war on a scale we have yet to see on this planet, bringing tension to stable parts of the world, making the tense places worse.

Don't dismiss this as military-driven paranoia: the alarm is being sounded by non-military actors — United Nations agencies, leading philanthropists, the World Bank, as well as major international aid agencies that have always strived to maintain a healthy distance from the world's military establishment.

Here in Canada the connection between climate change and global instability is not publicly discussed, and no one seems to really know why.

Perhaps our security agencies are overburdened, maybe it has to do with the fact we lag behind western developed nations in coming up with an actual climate change strategy.

"I don't want to be a scaremonger, but I am concerned climate change does not seem to be a priority within Canada's security, intelligence, defence establishment. I'm concerned that, as far as I know, Canadian security players haven't analyzed the existing scientific reports," said Margaret Purdy, who spent 28 years as a leading federal public servant in Canada's security apparatus, including as associate deputy minister of defence.

"This is a large, existential kind of threat; it is different. I can't think of any precedent for this kind of phenomenon."

But some of Canada's European allies — Purdy points to Britain as the leader — have fully embraced climate change as a security issue, not an environmental one.

Anthony Cary, the British high commissioner to Canada, says despite government cutbacks elsewhere, London has supplied his and other diplomatic missions with extra funding to help spread concern of climate security. The British now have a senior Canadian climate security officer, whose job it is to liaise with a wide range of government departments, academics and other key players. But Cary stressed this is "not a nefarious attempt to attack Canada or point out the inadequacies of Canadian policy," but is an effort to "encourage Canadians to see it as a cross-cutting issue that should involve the whole of government, that needs to be led from the centre."

British Defence Secretary John Reid sounded the alarm in a major 2006 speech that climate change and declining natural resources would lead to an increase in violent conflict over land, water and energy. He said climate change "will make scarce resources, clean water, viable agricultural land even scarcer" and will "make the emergence of violent conflict more rather than less likely."

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told her Senate confirmation hearing this past winter that "climate change is an unambiguous security threat. At the extreme it threatens our very existence. But well before that point, it could well incite new wars of an old kind over basic resources like food, water and arable land."

The Pentagon's most recent National Defence Strategy singles out the threats from climate change along side more conventional concerns such as terrorism and rogue states going nuclear.

Earlier this month, a diverse group that included the U.S. army, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and the philanthropic giant, the Rockefeller Foundation, sounded its own alarm with a tome that approached 7,000 pages, saying the "future effects" of climate change have "unprecedented implications for political and social stability," according to the British newspaper, The Independent, which obtained an advance copy of the report.

Yet, we hear little in Canada, even though the implications are serious, if not dire — particularly in the Arctic where the polar ice caps are melting faster than anyone predicted.

As she looks into the future, Purdy sees the potential threats across Canada: storm surges and rising sea levels causing widespread flooding and economic hardship in Atlantic Canada; Ontario's critical infrastructure, including power generation and water treatment, being knocked out; Droughts, floods and wildfires hitting the Prairies; B.C. engulfed with infestations of new bugs, more forest fires and water shortages. And all across Canada, the risk of infectious diseases rises due to problems with the air, food and water brought on by extreme weather.

The problem is, Purdy says, that with the exception of some notable work in the departments of health and natural resources no one has tried to quantify the long-term security impacts of climate change for Canada.

The Harper government's ambitious strategy for the Arctic that calls for a greater military presence and economic and social development is the best example of a policy that could address future threats, says Purdy.

"There is no doubt we will see the first implications in the Arctic. While that's very serious and needs sustained attention, that's not the whole picture," she said. "We have seven climate zones and this huge footprint. We're going to feel a wider variety of impacts than most European countries."

Canada will also face pressure at home from the worsening situation abroad. That will include calls to accept big numbers of settlers from other parts of the world.

Earlier this year, the British Ministry of Defence predicted that major coastal cities and their critical infrastructure will be at risk from repeated flooding.

The melting of the polar ice caps will create "territorial tensions" with Arctic rim states competing for the vast, untapped natural resources (this would, of course, apply to Canada, Russia and others).

And the weather will make life even more miserable in already tense parts of the world: rainfall shortages will make the Middle East drier, reducing access to drinking water. India, China and Pakistan will face a reduced water supply from melting Himalayas glaciers, "which will have a major impact on regional security."

Purdy says it is not far-fetched to conclude that climate change will fuel a rise international terrorism.

Already, some see harbingers of future disaster in contemporary events such as this summer's Canadian Prairie drought, and recent high profile disasters such as the cyclone that ravaged Myanmar or Hurricane Katrina.

Purdy says U.S. President Barack Obama has shown a clear understanding of the security risks associated with climate change. She is hopeful the American influence combined with the growing pressure of this December's world climate change conference in Denmark will prod Canada and others to embrace a deeper review of security concerns.

Cary says Britain's diplomatic outreach is also showing some positive signs at the highest levels, including with Canada's environment minister.

"I've spoken to Jim Prentice and I think he gets it," Cary said. "I think Canada will want to be a positive contributor."

© Copyright (c) Canwest News Service