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Climate change and conflict

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Good afternoon everyone. My name is Victoria Brereton and I work in the Research Unit at the Brussels Headquarters of International Crisis Group.

I would first like to thank the conference organizers for inviting to what promises to be a wide ranging debate. I think what we can see from today's agenda and the discussion thus far is the central position that climate change now occupies at the heart of EU policy and strategic thinking. As the European Commission's recent paper on Climate Change and International Security indicates, we have begun to engage with a breadth of potential impacts – encompassing diminishing resources, mass migration, severe socio-economic stress and increased political instability in some of the world's most fragile states. There is recognition that these threats demand a concerted and international response.

While I hope to contribute to this afternoon's debate, I admit to coming to it from a very specific perspective. Crisis Group mission and mandate is to provide country-focused and field-based analysis of specific conflict situations – we also work to identify and recommend concrete policies to assist in their resolution.

What I hope to do today, then, is describe how we – as a conflict resolution organisation – have traced and interpreted the climate change debate as it relates to deadly conflict. This is an important point to take stock – a year on from the IPCC's 4th major report and the wealth of publications, events and statements that followed. We have also seen the emergence of an increasingly nuanced debate on the relationship between climate change and violent conflict. I will offer some tentative conclusions on what those debates might mean for the business of conflict analysis generally.

Finally, I will focus briefly on a region identified by some as the world's first "climate change conflict" – that is Darfur, Sudan. Not only is Darfur -one of the most serious human tragedies facing the world today, the history of the conflict there provides a useful framework for considering the import of climate change, and environmental degradation more generally, in relation to violent conflict.

Climate science – progress and limits

Climate change research has developed rapidly over the past decade – with findings resting on a more robust and comprehensive set of data than ever before.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007 report reflected vital advances in our understanding of global warming and environmental degradation. And it presented us with some strong evidence. We know now that human activities are increasing at a rapid rate – and likely to continue, even if greenhouse gases are stabilized in the short term. There have already been changes to precipitation levels, increased droughts – and we face a greater than 90% chance of more extreme weather events in the future. What the IPCC's findings tell us, at base, is the historic magnitude of environmental change – as well as the urgency of efforts to mitigate it and help societies adapt.

But to the extent we want to take these findings one step forward – to project how those changes will unfold in a particular region and then interact with other considerations to produce deadly conflict – there are some limitations to

consider.

– Firstly, there are critical data gaps, particularly in areas affected by conflict, that make it difficult to know what changes have already occurred and map future ones.
– Then there are the "feedback" effects of global warming – the consequences of melting ice caps or changes in cloud cover – which may intensify or mitigate current processes.
– Projections also become more difficult at the state and sub-state level than at the broad regional level – where more, localised environmental factors become relevant. In a country as large as Kazakhstan, for example, environmental conditions vary considerably – with pollution levels, past radiation exposure and farming practices continually altering water access and supply.

These limitations - to regional and future modeling – have at times led to conflicting projections. A 2005 paper, prepared for a workshop on human security and climate change, used a climate model to predict rainfall patterns in sub-Saharan Africa between 2006-2059 – the aim to assess how negative rainfall changes might trigger conflict. But their model showed that overall rainfall was set to increase during that period and variability remain stable. So, while a relationship between rainfall and conflict had been found using past data, the relationship had little meaning for the next 50 years if rainfall was expected to improve. They concluded, tentatively, that "the cataclysmic predictions linking climate change and human security" may not apply to sub-Saharan Africa.

Or they might. We don't quite yet know – and fortunately more work is being done to make climate projections more specific and enhance our understanding of how and when changes will occur.

But as scientific research advances, there is another gap to fill in the climate/conflict equation: to the extent that we need to do our best to prevent wars breaking out or reigniting we need to know how environmental change will affect human activities – and in turn affect the incidence of conflict.

How changes will affect people

[As we have already heard today,] recent research tells us that many societies have already been affected by climate change. The IPCC's predictions for the future show that many areas of the world, particularly the developing world, will suffer possibly severe shortages. Experts predict that certain societies will see significant drops in food production, shifts in rainfall patterns accelerating desertification, or sea-level rise inundating farmlands and furthering the spread of disease.

But to assess how these scarcities – of water, food, health – cause or contribute to violent conflict we need to address two questions. Firstly, which societies will experience these socio-economic effects? Secondly, what factors determine whether conflict will commence or persist?

Observers have overwhelmingly emphasized the issue of vulnerability – the extent to which societies are dependent on climate sensitive resources and their capacity to adapt to climate impacts. Nicholas Stern's report on the Economics of Climate Change foreshadowed some of the IPCC's findings. He argued that developing countries are particularly vulnerable – due to their dependence on agriculture, high population growth, weak infrastructures and lack of resources leading to low adaptive capacities.

He goes on to discuss a broad range of effects that countries may experience – including an increased risk of conflict. This brings us to the second question. To pull together some of the most cited scenarios, climate could contribute to conflict in three broad, overlapping, ways:

– Climate-induced scarcity causing people to move in mass numbers – "environmental refugees" – potentially destabilizing neighbouring areas.
– The same declining access to water, land or returns on use of land producing competition over resources, potentially leading to violence.
– Increased climate variability – drought, flooding etc – causing economic shocks, reducing employment opportunities and increasing recruitment to armed groups. In turn increasing their capacity to wage war.

[Michael Mattiessen has given us some insight into how these various pressures – and others – could map out in difference areas of the world.]

But it is important to remember that these factors will inevitably interact with others – such as poor governance, political instability, ethnic tension – making it difficult to judge how climate change will affect a particular situation.

Equally of interest to us is the growing body of evidence showing quite the opposite relationship between climate and conflict. Water is a good example. Water scarcity has in the past led to cooperation between states – inter-state dialogue prompted by diminishing water supplies can build trust and, ultimately, institutionalize cooperation on a broader range of issues. Water access between India and Pakistan, for example, has served as an important feature of conflict resolution negotiations: one of the six committees established to resolve tensions in 2004 was explicitly devoted to water management.

What we are reminded of then is the crucial challenge of trying to capture the full range of factors that drive today's most violent and intractable conflicts, and to identify those that can be altered to reduce tensions.

The key question then must be how we translate these difficult issues into actionable policy – and for an organisation like Crisis Group, policy applicable to specific conflict situations. There are some more general propositions with a particular relevance for conflict. These fall into the broad category of adaptation - that is, practices that seek to reduce climate risks by limiting the vulnerability of societies to some of the potential socio-economic effects I've just discussed. They include:

– development initiatives to reduce reliance on climate sensitive activities, improve governance and invest in physical infrastructure
– efforts to bolster disaster preparedness and early warning, including improving rapid response capabilities
– incorporation of forward-looking (and climate-sensitive) resource management considerations in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction efforts; and
– diplomacy to encourage cooperation over resources before environmental stresses increase, and if necessary after.

An interesting point about these propositions is how closely they track some of the conflict prevention efforts we've all been working to improve in recent decades – good governance, early warning, resource management. Thus, much of the framework for implementing climate sensitive responses is to some extent already in place – the real challenge, as always, is mobilising the political will and resources to make it happen.

Darfur and conflict prevention

Darfur is an interesting case study to consider how climate change and environmental degradation more generally should be factored in to conflict resolution activities.

A number of articles over the last year or so have suggested that the "real roots" of the conflict in Darfur lie in long periods of drought in the 1970s and 80s – pushing nomadic communities to migrate southwards and leading to confrontations with sedentary Fur and Masalit tribes. The effect of drought and natural resource degradation – in the form of population shifts and the radicalization of ethnic identities – are certainly an important part of the background to the unprecedented levels of violence we've seen in this decade.

But while a critical factor, it is not the only one.

Darfur is the epicentre of overlapping circles of conflict – there's the five-year-old war between the Darfur rebel movements and the government, part of the breakdown between Sudan's centre – the NCP in Khartoum – and the marginalised peripheries; there's the proxy war that Chad and Sudan are fighting by hosting and supporting the other's rebel groups; and then localised conflicts, centred on land tensions between sedentary and nomadic tribes. Moreover, as last month's events in Abyei vividly demonstrated, peace between Sudan's North and South is still fragile. All of these dynamics are compounded by the lack of a comprehensive, coordinated international strategy toward Sudan.

Against this background, the more proximate causes of the conflict in Darfur are apparent. To provide a specific example, during a six month period in 2007, we saw a sharp rise in assassinations and murders within IDP camps around Zalingei, a pattern replicated in a growing number of camps across Darfur. As camps grow, rebel and government forces are working with local authorities to select, train and arm specific groups – as part of the wider battle between Khartoum and Darfur's multiple rebel forces. The militarization and politicization of IDP camps and their leaders has introduced a new and volatile political force to the Darfurian conflict, potentially contributing to future violence.

The complexity of the conflict in Darfur shows why it can be so challenging to devise conflict resolution policies that are effective in their immediate goals – ending the suffering of victims – as well as in addressing long-term structural risk factors, such as environmental stress. But it also gives us more than enough reason to do better.

In summary, research and experience shows that climate change and environmental degradation can exacerbate conflict tensions, and may even be an important underlying cause. But is rarely sufficient in itself to explain large-scale violence, and it may even lead to cooperative outcomes where we might not expect them. For these reasons, it should not dominate conflict prevention approaches. Instead, it should inform them and serve as further impetus to do better at finding sustainable solutions to today's challenges.