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## ENVIRONMENT: Ripples of Global Warming Spread Outward

**Barbara Litzbeck**

**UNITED NATIONS, Nov 3 (IPS) - Human health and the earth's ecosystems are increasingly threatened by climate change, warns a new study jointly released by three leading environmental organisations here this week.**

"Climate Change Futures", by the Centre for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Swiss Re, an insurance company based in Switzerland, says that adverse health impacts are likely to cause severe economic consequences.

"Global climate change and the ripples of that change will affect every aspect of life, from municipal budgets for snowplowing to the spread of disease," the report says. For example, the effects of hurricanes "can extend far beyond coastal properties to the heartland through their impact on offshore drilling and oil prices".

Human health is affected worldwide by diseases driven by climate change, according to the authors of the report. "Health is the final common pathway of all that we see around us," says Paul Epstein, associate director of the Centre for Health and the Global Environment, who contributed to the report.

Epstein says malaria has become the most dangerous disease following natural disasters, because warming and extreme weather spur the breeding cycles of mosquitoes, which carry the malaria parasite.

"For human health, malaria is clearly danger number one, killing 3,000 African children every day," he told IPS. "This is a dramatic increase from the 1950s and '60s, when we thought we could control and contain this disease and the numbers were really dipping."

Malaria is spreading increasingly in highland areas in Africa. Before the 1970s, cold temperatures became freezing at high altitudes and thus limited mosquito populations to lower areas. Today, increased warmth has caused mountain glaciers to shrink in the tropics, permitting some mosquitoes to migrate higher in the mountains.

For 1999, the report estimates that in sub-Saharan Africa, the total cost of malaria can be valued at between 5.8 17.4 percent of Gross National Product. Malaria has also been shown to decrease economic growth in some countries by 1.3 percent per year.

In addition, West Nile virus, Lyme disease and asthma are also on the rise. "Carbon dioxide is affecting the plants, spores and fungi. (It has) an impact on public health that we had not even thought of several years ago," says Epstein. "In the U.S. alone, asthma prevalence has quadrupled since 1980, which costs the American taxpayer up to 18 billion dollars a year."

Although industrialised countries produce the most greenhouse gases blamed for global warming, the study points out that developing

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countries suffer the worst consequences.

"Poor countries and their people are most vulnerable to the increased risks from rising water levels, more frequent and intense extreme weather events, the spread of infectious diseases including malaria, intensified water scarcity and failing agricultural crops, and the extinction of species", said Brian Dawson, a senior climate change policy advisor with UNDP.

The costs of climate change fall disproportionately on developing countries, but money to cope with these challenges is scarce, he said. "The developing world heavily depends on their ecosystems. If there is a drought, the developed countries can buy food from elsewhere. But a lot of people living in the developing world depend on what the season provides on food," Dawson told IPS.

"They have the least resources to build adaptation measures required. The developed countries can build storm barriers and strong shelters, they can have emergency support systems and warning systems. The developing countries just don't have the resources unless they get it from someone else; if they don't have services that might help to protect them, people will die."

The world's coral reefs are a stark example of the impact of climate change on poor people. Coral reef decline began in 1980 and some 27 percent of reefs worldwide have been degraded by bleaching, while another 60 percent are deemed highly vulnerable to bleaching, disease and subsequent overgrowth by micro-algae.

Climate change could lead to the collapse of reefs entirely within several decades. Just one degree Celsius additional warming of sea surface temperatures could bleach the entire ring of coral reefs, according to the study.

This in turn would disrupt the livelihoods of fishermen and coastal communities relying on the reefs for their income and main source of protein, undermine the tourism industry, and remove the storm protection provided by the reefs.

In order to ease the economic impacts of climate change, the study suggests that the business community should be actively involved, since the funding provided by donor countries is not sufficient even to meet the fairly modest Millenium Development Goals (MDGs).

The eight MDGs include a 50 percent reduction in poverty and hunger; universal primary education; reduction of child mortality by two-thirds; cutbacks in maternal mortality by three-quarters; the promotion of gender equality; environmental sustainability; reversal of the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and a global partnership for development between the rich and poor.

"It is vital that the private sector in the developing and industrialised world also take on this challenge and bring their considerable expertise and resources to bear on humankind's greatest killers -- poverty and hunger," says the UNDP's Dawson.

"We need to unleash on these challenges a new kind of 'public-private partnership' where the mandates and business models of both the private sector and the public sector -- i.e. the U.N., non-governmental organisations, civil society and academia -- are aligned, coordinated and focused." (END/2005)

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