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UN: Global food and water crisis threatens 3 billion people

More than 3 billion people are threatened with having their food and water supply cut off in the coming decades, the United Nations warned Thursday. This will be felt first by the 3.2 billion people who are already affected by land degradation, the vast majority, more than 3 billion, living in developing countries.

The UN document was released in summary form two days after another from the World Resources Institute, which focused primarily on the risk various regions face of running out of water. Both reports make clear that without drastic action on a world scale to halt and reverse global warming, the lack of food and water faced by hundreds of millions across the world will become the daily life of the vast majority of the world's population.

Similar to previous IPCC reports, Climate Change and Land brings together hundreds of scientific papers published from every continent studying the impact of global warming on human lives. The most significant results from each of these were distilled by 103 scientists from 52 countries, which were then reviewed and edited by a broader team to ensure the most up to date information was included as the report developed.

Collectively, the data collated show that land degradation, “expressed as long-term reduction or loss of at least one of the following: biological productivity, ecological integrity, or value to humans” is poised to starve the 821 million people who already face hunger, most of whom are in Africa and Asia. The threat of dying from thirst or starvation has played a critical role in forcing hundreds of millions to leave their homes and become

so-called “climate refugees.” The UN estimated last year that 210 million people worldwide have been displaced since 2008 as a result of climate change.



Children drink from a tap in Maiduguri, Borno state, Nigeria [Credit: UNICEF/Gilbertson]

The number of people who will face disaster will only increase as crop yields decline largely the result of erosion, lower soil nutrients, desertification, rising oceans and reduced access to fresh water. A lack of water in turn means that it is harder to raise livestock while simultaneously increasing the likelihood of disease, especially those such as cholera that thrive when water is scarce.

All of the above will in turn be made even worse as floods, droughts, hurricanes and cyclones become more common in a warmer world, making it increasingly impossible for various regions of Earth to support large populations. The report explicitly notes that land degradation, along with climate change is “one of the biggest and most urgent challenges for humanity.”

Moreover, places such as Siberia—which a decade ago was relatively unaffected by climate change – have begun to experience mass permafrost melting, which has caused towns and cities to literally sink into the Earth as the formerly sturdy foundations begin to melt. Permafrost melting has the added effect of drastically increasing the atmosphere’s methane content, a greenhouse gas approximately eighty times more potent than carbon dioxide. Land degradation is caused by climate change and in turn accelerates the problem, both by releasing different forms of carbon and through reducing nature’s ability to reabsorb carbon.

Land degradation is also found in the more advanced capitalist countries. The most striking example is the lead found in the water of Flint, Michigan, once a major industrial

US city. After the municipality unilaterally decided to pay some of its debt to Wall Street by switching to a cheaper, polluted water supply.

The example of Flint also points to the main weakness of the entire IPCC initiative, which promotes the illusion that it can pressure politicians to adopt “policy changes” that will benefit the broader human population. The contempt the world’s ruling elites have towards humanity as a whole was summed up when then-president Barack Obama declared that Flint’s residents, and particularly their children “will be fine” after drinking lead-filled water.

Moreover, it washes over the 2017 Carbon Majors Report, which showed that seventy percent of all greenhouse gases, the chemical drivers of climate change, are released by just one hundred companies. Thus, global warming is not caused by, as the New York Times snidely remarked, people with a “penchant for private backyard swimming pools,” but by the multimillionaires and billionaires that make up the capitalist class of the advanced countries. Hundreds of billions of dollars are made every year by this cabal and they have fought for decades to maintain this status quo even as the Earth is poisoned and burned.

Last March, more than one million students and young people marched in the **Youth Climate Strike** to protest against global warming. The international demonstration evoked a broad response and indicates both the serious nature of the ecological crisis and the radicalization of youth all over the world to fight it.

More important is the growing intervention of the working class into international politics. The past two months have seen mass protests in Hong Kong, the US territory of Puerto Rico, a strike wave in India and the continued “yellow vest” movement in France. They are the harbinger of working class struggles erupting throughout the world as workers realize that only they themselves can solve the untenable social conditions that they face.

Among these is climate change. As the IPCC documents state, there must be “rapid reductions in greenhouse gas emissions across all sectors” if there is any chance to reverse the impacts of global warming. This implicitly means that the world economy must undergo a progressive transformation, one which overturns the present regime based on private profit and a world divided into warring nation-states and that places the productive forces—particularly the agriculture and energy industries—into the hands of the working class in order to restore the planet’s ability to sustain human life.

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