

Peace

PEACE IS ESSENTIAL TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. MOST WARS AND ARMED CONFLICTS TAKE PLACE IN THE WORLD'S HIGHLANDS. THEY REPRESENT PERHAPS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MOUNTAINS. IN 1999, 23 OF THE 27 MAJOR ARMED CONFLICTS IN THE WORLD WERE BEING FOUGHT IN MOUNTAIN REGIONS.

MOUNTAINS: TODAY'S WAR ZONES

Mountainous areas – ranging from Afghanistan to the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Andes, parts of the Near East and Africa – are the flash points of conflicts afflicting the world today. The reasons for this are complex and varied, but the effects on mountain people are universally devastating. Fighting prevents them from fundamental life-sustaining tasks ranging from collecting water to planting and harvesting crops. Where landmines are laid, agricultural lands must be left

barren until expensive mine clearance can be undertaken, typically many years later. Infrastructure such as roads and schools are destroyed, halting economic development. The death, injuries and emotional trauma of war devastate individual lives and national advancement. Mountain regions suffer disproportionately from all these effects of conflict because they are often the poorest and least developed places in the world as well as the homelands of indigenous cultures.



Most of the world's armed conflicts take place in mountain regions. (Photo: Dermot Tatlow/Panos Pictures)

FIGHTING FOR THE HIGHER GROUND

Occupying the high ground has always been of strategic importance when opposing forces have fought for local or regional supremacy. The rugged high terrain of mountain areas offers

not just a place to seize military advantage. It can also be a place of refuge for opposition movements retreating from lowland areas. Mountain people are helpless hosts to these "refugees".



We are all
mountain people

www.mountains2002.org

Key facts

▲ The longest-running armed conflict in the world, other than the Israeli-Arab struggle, is on the Himalayan Siachen Glacier, where India and Pakistan have been in conflict for 54 years.

▲ The Balkans conflict dates back to 1300. It is rooted in clashing ethnicity, nationalism and religion in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia (including Kosovo Province), Montenegro, Slovenia and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In 1995, there were 45 000 United Nations peacekeepers in the region.

▲ One million people died and one-third of the population fled Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghanistan conflict of the 1980s and the subsequent civil conflict. The country's ancient irrigation system and other agricultural infrastructure were destroyed, and landmines still inhibit planting.

▲ With conflict ongoing in Afghanistan, virtually the entire resident population of 20 million people is at risk of hunger, a situation exacerbated by a prolonged drought.

▲ Most of the world's large rivers flow through two or more countries and are a primary cause of conflict between countries.

▲ Large dams are a major source of conflict when mountain communities are forced out of their homes to make way for the dams and reservoirs. Four million people are displaced in this way annually, according to a 1994 World Bank estimate.

LINKS

FAO Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture

www.fao.org/WAICENT/faoinfo/economic/giews/english/giewse.htm

Global IDP Project

www.idpproject.org/

Integrated Regional Information Networks

www.irinnews.org/homepage.asp

International Crisis Group

www.crisisweb.org/default.cfm

Mountain Forum on-line library

www.mtnforum.org/resources/resources.htm

Oxfam: Cut conflict campaign

www.oxfam.org.uk/campaign/cutconflict/index.html

Project Ploughshares

www.ploughshares.ca/

ReliefWeb

www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

www.sipri.se/

United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention

www.undcp.org

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)

www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/index.html

United Nations Peacekeeping

www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/home_bottom.htm

World Food Programme

www.wfp.org

WHO'S THE BOSS?

The remoteness of mountain regions can make it difficult to create a universally accepted set of rules and regulations regarding resource management – and their enforcement next to impossible. This creates opportunities for disputes over resources, territory and political jurisdiction. In the absence of a clearly defined and authoritative system for settling disputes, local conflicts can degenerate into long-standing conflicts between neighbouring communities and countries.

Local clan affiliations may be the only

systems isolated mountain communities feel they can trust to legitimately represent their interests. In these conditions, attempts to introduce new resource management practices that involve entire watersheds may be seen as a threat. Furthermore, in power vacuums, it is men who usually take control, often by force of arms. Women, even though they may have the deepest knowledge about how best to use local resources, are rarely consulted when conflicts arise over resource management.

HOT WATER

In 1995, the inability to manage mountain waters was the source of 14 international conflicts. A look at the global situation suggests that there are many opportunities for similar conflicts. Rivers rarely follow national borders – two or more countries share 214 river basins, covering more than half of the earth's surface and home to 40 percent of the world's population. As populations increase and the demand for water intensifies, the potential for international wars over water resources escalates.

History offers some reasons for hope. There are many examples of international treaties regulating the use of mountain water that have stood the test of time, even though the countries involved have had intensely strained relations – such as India's and Pakistan's mutu-

al respect for the treaty governing their shared use of the Indus River.

For many communities in both highland and lowland areas, internal conflicts over the control of mountain waters are a far more real threat than international ones, and they can be just as catastrophic.

National governments may be able to find common interests in building a large dam but their shared interests may be at odds with those of the mountain communities that live near a proposed dam or in the lands that may be flooded. When local interests are not taken into account in planning large-scale water management projects, such as dams, there is bound to be protest. Legitimate protest is sometimes met with violent repression, triggering a downward spiral of conflict.

MOUNTAINS, DRUGS AND CONFLICT

Mountains are the primary battleground in international efforts to control the illegal drug trade. Both the coca bush, the leaves of which are used to produce cocaine, and the opium poppy, which is used to produce heroin, are native to mountain areas.

For international criminal organizations, cocaine and heroin mean big money. For many mountain farmers in developing countries, with no other sources of income, the drug trade simply means survival. Often it is poor

farmers who pay the heaviest price when governments and international organizations attempt to eliminate drug trafficking by curtailing the cultivation of illegal crops.

When drug money is available to buy large amounts of sophisticated weaponry, conflicts over political, social or economic issues can explode into full-scale military and paramilitary operations. In these situations, it is the least affluent mountain families who suffer the most.

LEFT OUT AND FIGHTING BACK

Conflict in mountain areas often arises when mountain communities are denied a voice in how local resources are used. In some areas of the world, lack of effective political representation has been the fodder for violent revolution. Local rebel movements gain momentum when central governments based in lowland capitals impose their rule over mountain communities and decide how to

exploit mountain resources and who will profit from them. When mountain communities are of indigenous heritage or belong to an ethnic, racial or religious minority, their marginalization can be politically expedient for governing parties. The exclusion of mountain people from national politics can also be the result of deeply engrained and unquestioned racist attitudes.

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