

Amid 'dramatic' climate changes, UN launches plan to step-up polar weather and sea-ice monitoring

15 May 2017 – With relatively little data available about the Earth's Polar Regions – posing risks for people and the environment – the United Nations weather agency has kicked off of a two-year international effort to close gaps in polar forecasting capacity and to improve future environmental safety at the farthest reaches of the planet.

Polar conditions are changing dramatically, impacting weather across the globe, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said, launching the Year of Polar Prediction, which will aim to improve predictions of weather, climate and ice conditions in the Arctic and Antarctic.

“Because of teleconnections, the poles influence weather and climate conditions in lower latitudes where hundreds of millions of people live,” [warned](#) WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas.

“Warming Arctic air masses and declining sea ice are believed to affect ocean circulation and the jet stream, and are potentially linked to extreme phenomena such as cold spell, heat waves and droughts in the northern hemisphere,” he added.

Scientists, with the help of data from operational forecasting centres, will observe, model, and improve forecasts of weather and climate systems to learn more about and improve the understanding of the weather changes at the poles.

In light of [The Year of Polar Prediction](#), special observing periods will be added to improve the number of routine observations, for example by weather balloon launches, and buoy deployments from research vessels to measure atmospheric and oceanographic conditions.

Climate change at the Poles

The effects of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions, one of the leading causes of global warming, are felt more intensely in the Polar Region as than anywhere else. According to WMO, both the Arctic and Antarctica are warming twice as fast as the rest of the world causing melting of glaciers and ice shelves, shrinking sea ice and snow cover. Polar wildlife ecosystems and indigenous population are already feeling the impact of climate change.

“Arctic sea-ice maximum extent after the winter re-freezing period in March was the lowest on record because of a series of ‘heat-waves.’ Antarctic sea ice minimum extent after the most recent Southern Hemisphere summer melt was also the lowest on record,” explained Thomas Jung of the Alfred Wegener Institute Helmholtz Centre for Polar and Marine Research, and chair of the Polar Prediction Project steering committee.

“The rate and implications of polar environmental change is pushing our scientific knowledge to the limits,” he warned.

WMO further predicts that the noticeable changes in weather, climate and ice conditions at the poles are leading to increased human activities such as transportation, tourism, fisheries and natural resource exploitation and extraction.

“The expected increase in activity comes with its own share of risks to both the environment and society, including traditional indigenous livelihoods”, said Mr. Taalas. “Ice-laden polar seas are a challenge to navigate, whilst any oil spills could be catastrophic.”

“Accurate weather and sea-ice information will thus become increasingly vital in order to improve safety management in Polar Regions and beyond,” the WMO chief concluded.

Improving Arctic forecasts

Polar and high mountain activities are among WMO’s top strategic priorities because of the growing impact of climate change from greenhouse gas emissions.

The Arctic and Antarctic are currently among the world’s most poorly observed regions. Lack of data along with limitations of models, impact the quality of forecasts while insufficient information about polar weather will also affect quality of weather forecasts in other parts of the world.

WMO therefore expects that advances in Polar prediction will lead to improved weather forecasts and climate predictions both for Polar Regions as well as densely populated countries in other parts of the world.

[Ongoing forest destruction has put Asia-Pacific at risk of missing global development targets – UN agency](#)

15 May 2017 – The destruction of forests in many Asian countries continues apace, threatening the realization of global sustainable development goals by the 2030 deadline, according to the United Nations agricultural agency.

“While forests are critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), they continue to be degraded and lost at a rate of 3.3 million hectares per year,” warned Patrick Durst, the Senior Forestry Officer at the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

Covering one-third of the earth's surface, forests provide an invaluable variety of social, economic and environmental benefits. Forests and trees sustain and protect all life in invaluable ways.

They provide the clean air for breathing and the safe water to drink. Home to more than 80 per cent of land animals and plants, forests safeguard the planet's biodiversity and act as a natural defence against climate change.

"In this region, forests continue to be converted to agriculture, destroyed and replaced by man-made infrastructure, housing, mining, and other land uses. Forest fires also continue to pose a threat to the region," said Mr. Durst.

When the [SDGs](#) were formulated and agreed upon in 2015, forests were explicitly mentioned in order that they be aided through the protection, restoration and promotion of sustainable forests while halting and reversing associated land degradation and the loss of biodiversity.



Sustainably managed forests hold vast potential to play a decisive role in ending hunger, improving livelihoods and combating climate change. Photo: FAO/Simon Maina

According to FAO, a third of the world's biggest cities, including Mumbai, Bogotá and New York, obtain much of their drinking water directly from forested areas. In short, life on earth is made possible and sustainable thanks to forests and trees.

Forests and poverty reduction

Forests also play a major role in supporting human livelihoods. Nina Brandstrup, FAO Representative in Sri Lanka, underscored that they have much to contribute to ending poverty – the first SDG.

"Globally, 1.3 billion people, mostly in developing countries, are estimated to be 'forest peoples,' who depend on forests for their livelihoods and income. Twenty-eight per cent of the total income of households living in or near forests come from forest and environmental income. Ending poverty would need to take the health of our forests into account and engage those 'forest peoples' directly," she explained.

According to FAO's Global Forest Resource Assessment in 2015, forests continue to be lost in many countries of the Asia-Pacific region, including Sri Lanka. Degradation of forest quality further decreases the forests' capacity to provide goods and services necessary for human survival. These losses will be more acutely felt as the demand for forest products steadily rises in the future.

While most countries in the Asia-Pacific region continue to struggle to respond to forest loss, some are taking positive action. Through reforestation programmes, China and Viet Nam are actually increasing the

amount of forested land.

Meantime, the Government of Sri Lanka has announced plans to increase the country's forest cover by as much as 35 per cent – including with the people that will benefit most.

South Sudan: UN, partners seek \$1.4 billion to cope with 'world's fastest growing refugee crisis'

15 May 2017 – The United Nations refugees and food relief agencies today urged donors to step up support for people fleeing crisis-hit South Sudan as the \$1.4 billion response plan remains 86 per cent unfunded.

“Bitter conflict and deteriorating humanitarian conditions in South Sudan are driving people from their homes in record numbers,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, in a news release jointly issued by his office ([UNHCR](#)) and the World Food Programme ([WFP](#)).

The situation in South Sudan continues to worsen, with a combination of conflict, drought and famine leading to further displacement and a rapid exodus of people fleeing one of the world's most severe crises.

South Sudan has now become the world's fastest growing refugee crisis with more than 1.8 million refugees, including one million children, having sought safety in Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic, the news release said.

“The suffering of the South Sudanese people is just unimaginable,” said WFP Executive Director David Beasley. “Aid workers often cannot reach the most vulnerable hungry people. Many are dying from hunger and disease, many more have fled their homeland for safety abroad.”

Humanitarian agencies are seeking \$1.4 billion to provide life-saving aid to South Sudanese refugees in the six neighbouring countries until the end of 2017, according to an updated response plan presented in Geneva today. But the plan so far remains only 14 per cent funded.

The current rate of people fleeing South Sudan exceeds the humanitarian community's already pessimistic estimates. For example, the number of people fleeing to Sudan in March surpassed the expected figure for the entire year. Uganda is also seeing higher than expected arrivals and at this rate is likely to soon host over one million South Sudanese refugees.

“Our funding situation forced us to cut food rations for many refugees

in Uganda,” Mr. Beasley said.

With acute underfunding, humanitarian agencies are struggling to provide food, water, nutrition support, shelter and health services to refugees.

Communities hosting refugees are among the world’s poorest and are under immense pressure.

“Helping refugees is not just about providing emergency aid,” said UNHCR’s Grandi. “It also means supporting governments and communities in neighbouring countries to shore up services and economies in the areas receiving them.”

[At China’s Belt and Road Forum, UN chief Guterres stresses shared development goals](#)

14 May 2017 – Speaking at a major international conference in Beijing, United Nations [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres today drew comparisons between China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative and the Sustainable Development Goals, saying both are rooted in a shared vision for global development.

“Both strive to create opportunities, global public goods and win-win cooperation. And both aim to [deepen ‘connectivity’ across countries and regions](#): connectivity in infrastructure, trade, finance, policies and, perhaps most important of all, among peoples,” the Secretary-General said addressing Chinese President Xi Jinping and dozens of other state leaders at the Belt and Road Forum.

The attendees represent some of the more than 60 countries included in the Belt and Road plan that China introduced in 2013 to stimulate trade and economic growth along the ancient Silk Road and beyond.

“In order for the participating countries along the Belt and Road to fully benefit from the potential of enhanced connectivity, it is crucial to strengthen the links between the Initiative and the Sustainable Development Goals,” Mr. Guterres noted, adding that the 17 Goals can guide the policies and actions under the Belt and Road towards true sustainable development.

The initiative reportedly includes nearly \$1 trillion worth of infrastructure investments in Africa, Asia and Europe. As these projects which include bridges, nuclear plants and railways unfold, Mr. Guterres highlighted the need to work together to uphold international environmental and social standards, and ensuring that rural areas, not just cities,

benefit.

With the initiative expected to generate vast investments in infrastructure, let us seize the moment to help countries make the transition to clean-energy, low-carbon pathways instead of locking in unsustainable practices for decades to come, he said, praising Chinese leadership on climate change.

He also urged donor countries to continue investing in development projects through official development assistance (ODA), and urged them to fulfil their commitments under the [Addis Ababa Plan of Action](#), which finances projects related to the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)).

Mr. Guterres also called on Governments to settle peacefully any tensions related to the One Belt, One Road initiative, saying that "just as the initiative opens new corridors for goods, let us also keep open the channels for dialogue."

He praised the initiative for its "immense potential" to promote access to markets, and as "far-reaching in geography and ambition."

Since arriving in China on 13 May, Mr. Guterres has met with senior Chinese officials, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi. He also held a meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

[Armed group attacks civilians, UN in Central African Republic overnight; one peacekeeper killed](#)

13 May 2017 – The United Nations peacekeeping force in the Central African Republic is sending reinforcements to the south-eastern town of Bangassou, where an armed group opened fire on civilians overnight killing an undisclosed number and at least one UN peacekeeper.

The armed elements [continue to systematically and deliberately attack](#) the MINUSCA base with heavy weaponry to impede the peacekeepers from doing their extremely vital task of protecting the civilian population and to divert them from their primary vocation of saving lives," the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the country, known by the French acronym MINUSCA, said in a statement.

The Mission said that members of a wide coalition, including anti-Balaka elements attacked civilian populations overnight, targeting in particular Muslims, in the Tokoyo neighborhood of Bangassou.

Despite heavy fire against MINUSCA's field office, peacekeepers attempted to respond to the attack in Tokoyo to protect civilians. In the firefight, which continued into the morning of 13 May, one peacekeeper of the Moroccan contingent died from gunshot injuries, the Mission said.

According to preliminary information, displaced civilians have fled to the mosque, the catholic church and a hospital.

At this time it is difficult to ascertain the humanitarian situation in Bangassou. However credible sources have confirmed an undetermined number of civilian casualties, MINUSCA said.

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of MINUSCA Parfait Onanga-Anyanga vigorously condemned the attack, adding that MINUSCA will do everything in its power together with the legitimate Central African authorities to arrest the perpetrators of these horrible acts.

He said the international community will be relentless in apprehending the perpetrators of these crimes and all their commanders, including some instigators who may be sponsoring these attacks from Bangui.

Our actions will be relentless. The blood of peacekeepers and the blood of innocent Central Africans will not fall in vain in this country, he added.

The attack came just hours after the UN held a memorial ceremony to honour five peacekeepers killed on 8 May in a nearby village of Yogofongo. People connected with the anti-Balaka group are also suspected in the attack.

Special Representative Onanga-Anyanga was joined by the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, and other senior UN officials, who are on a special visit to the country. Earlier in the day, they visited the 10 Cambodian and Moroccan peacekeepers injured in the attack and wished them a speedy recovery.