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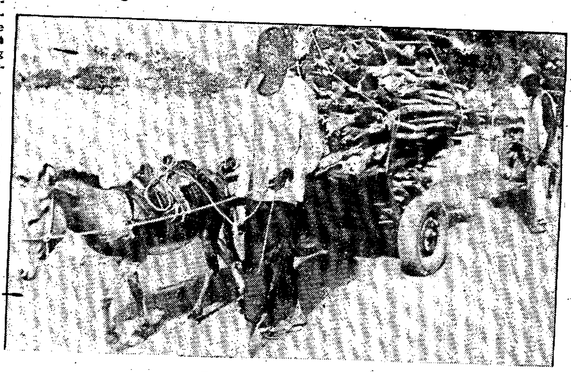

Trees as firewood are denuding forests

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

Environment, development and peace

"Development is the new name for peace' was the message Pope John Paul II delivered when he visited the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) during last year's Eucharistic Conference in Nairobi, Kenya.

Peace is not only the absence of war: it is sustainable development and satisfaction of basic human needs, without which, there can be no peace. The experience of this century shows that where basic human needs are not met, peace and stability cannot be sustained.

There is no peace when 450 million people suffer from chronic malnutrition and when millions of people, mainly but not exclusively in the developing countries, are hungry, homeless and struggling to merely survive.

When basic human needs are not met, competition and conflict intensify. The evidence is in the dozens of internal small wars of this century in which millions of people have died. From the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, with its slogan of "land and liberty", to many of the anti-colonial and post-colonial civil wars of the past three to four decades in Africa, Asia and Latin America, extreme poverty, inequitable distribution of diminishing resources, and failure to provide basic human needs have played an important role. The same experiences show that failure to meet these needs, essential to peace, has often been due to the misuse, depletion or deterioration of existing natural resources.

By the year 2000, only 14 years from now, the Earth will have to support 6.2 million people, some 50 per cent more than in 1980. It can do so, but only through sustainable development. The alternative is increased poverty, intensified competition for diminishing natural resources and increasing conflict. But development can only be sustained if its basis, the environment, is protested. As Pope John Paul II said in Nairobi, environment and development are tandem goals of equal importance.

Development requires that people have access to basic human needs — food, water, health and shelter — and the means to produce more on a sustainabl basis. It means elimination of the hopeless poverty in which much of the third world lives and which in many countries is a source of unrest and conflict.

To develop, people must be able to feel themselves from their own land or from other production enabling them to buy their food. But for most developing countries there is little choice. They must produce their own food, depend increasingly on the vagaries of food aid, or go without.

Many are going without, and their numbers are fast increasing. Some 450 million people, mainly in the developing countries, suffer from chronic malnutrition and the number is expected to rise to 600-800 million by the year 2000. While food production has been increasing in the developing countries over the past two decades, rapid population growth has wiped out most of the gain

The figures are alarming. In 1961-1965 the developing countries grew 96 per cent of their own cereal requirements and their net imports were only 10 million metric tons per year. But by 1978-1979 they produced only 92 per cent of their needs and the deficit had risen to 52 million metric tons a year. In Africa alone the deficit in cereal production rose from 5 per cent of needs to over 17 per cent between 1961 and 1979, and has continued ports rose from 3.8 million to rise rapidly. Cereal imtons in 1965 to 11 million in 1976 and over 20 million in 1980. Experts say that if current trends continue, Africa's shortfall in cereal production is likely to reach 203 million tons a year by the year 2007.

In much of the developing world, and particularly in Africa, the natural resources on which food production depends' — soil, fresh water and forest cover—are being lost at record rates. Man's struggle for food is destroying the land on which he depends to grow his food. Famine-hit Ethiopia and the West African Sahel provide many examples of this.

In Ethiopia's northern highlands, the population has nearly tripled over the past four decades, bringing extreme pressures to bear on arable lands, as the traditional farming methods have not changed. In the desperate search for land to grow food and fuelwood, farmers have deforested vital water catchments and cultivated steep hillsides, causing massive soil erosion. Annual soil loss rates of over 20 tons a hectare are common and with each centimetre of precious topsoil eroded the land loses a bit more of its productivity.

It also loses its ability to retain moisture, a critical factor in crop production. Under normal conditions, topsoil and vegetation cover act as a huge water reservoir, like a sponge soaking up water when it rains and gradually releasing it to crops, groundwater reservoirs and to streams.

At the beginning of this century, some 40 per cent of the land was covered with forest, by the early 1960s this had fallen to 16 per cent, and by 1980 barely 4 per cent of the forest cover remained. The results are disastrous. When it rains the water no longer seeps into the soil to replenish groundwater, most of it runs off tearing away the topsoil at ever faster rates. It is part of a vicious circle of land degradation, soil erosion, flooding and drought that is turning once fertile farmland into barren desert at rapidly increasing rates.

Ethiopia is one example. There are many others, from the western Sahel to south eastern Africa. Dr Mostafa K. Tolba, the Executive Director of UNEP, in his report to the African Environmental Conference (Cairo, 16 - 18 December 1985) said: "Africa is a continent in crisis. It is suffering from

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a continual drain on, and degradation of its natural resources — plant cover, soils, water, animal resources and climate".

The dry zones of Africa may present a "worse case scenario", but the basic problems are far more widespread — from the Bolician Altiplano to the north east Brazilian Sertao, to South Asia and the Himalayas, the cycle of deforestation, land degradation, soil erosion, flooding and drought is destroying the land, the people and their hopes for development. In India alone, the flood-prone areas doubled from 20 million hectares to 40 million hectares between 1971 and 1980. The drought-prone areas also expanded to cover 59 million hectares, causing serious losses in productivity.

Many countries are already caught between a continuing haemorrhage of arable land and rapidly increasing population. A recent United Nations study of 117 developing countries found that many third world countries can no longer feed their people from their own land on a sustained basis at their present levels of farming. Some 54 countries were deemed incapable of fearing long-term the number of people they had in 1975. Those countries now have from 20 to 30 per cent more people to support. They have survived by over-exploiting their land; mining its future potential to satisfy current needs. It is a form of deficit financing which cannot continue indefinitely.

Two-third of the third world population live in countries that by the end of this century — a scant 14 years hence — will already be cultivating an average of 96 per cent of their arable land. In most cases they will have nearly 50 per cent more people than they have today, and will be unable to feed their population from their own land at a low level in inputs. Africa, for instance, on the basis of current trends, be able to support only 55 per cent of its year 200 population, without a significant rise in the level of agriculture.

This implies intensified competition within and possibly between countries for the principal resources—land and water—needed for food production. It increases the possibilities for conflict, particularly in areas with imbalances in the distribution of land and water resources.

The plight of those countries and destabilising effects of severe food shortakes, intensifying poverty and economic collapse, could well jeopardise national, regional, and ultimately world peace. Lack of agricultural development and pressure on land resources often act as stimuli to internal and border conflict.

It is a vicious circle because rural unrest and civil and international wars almost invariably depress agricultural production and cause environmental damage. But war, the threat of war, and the resources devoted to armaments, drastically reduce the potential of many developing countries to invest in agricultural development. The average number of wars in progress, mainly in developing countries, has increased from nine per year in the 1950s, to 14 per year since 1970.

Military spending in 1981 was estimated at $695 billion, or about $131 per capita. In the third world it came to $117 billion or $37 per person. These figures might be compared to the $4.8 billion a year over 20 years needed to halt desertification in third world, or the FAO estimate of $85 billion a year over two decades, to raise the rate of growth in agricultural production from 2.8 per cent a year to 3.7 per cent a year, and thereby reverse the decline in food self-sufficiency. But when government budgets are limited, military spending competes with investment in productive spheres and often enjoys a highly priority.

Priorities must be changed if the world is to maintain its rapidly growing population and improve people's quality of life. To do so it must accelerate development while conserving the environment which makes this possible. The alternative is increasingly evident—rapidly declining quality of life, intensifying poverty and competition for diminishing resources, recurrent famine and food shortages in the poorer developing countries, all leading to unrest, violence, and threats to the stability of nations.

The message of Pope John Paul II touched on the heart of UNEP policy. He said that development was a foundation for peace and that environment programmes for food and housing were concrete ways of promoting peace. Environmentally sound development, sustainable development, is the basis for sustainable peace.

UNEP