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Latest News

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Languages

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 - Iran
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 - Haiti
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- Mideast & Mediterranean
 - Iraq
 - Israel/Palestine
- North America
 - Neo-Cons
 - Bush's Legacy

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 - Climate Change
 - Tieramérica
- Human Rights
- Health
 - HIV/AIDS
- Indigenous Peoples
- Economy & Trade
- Labour
- Population
 - Reproductive Rights
 - Migration&Refugees
- Arts & Entertainment
- Education
- ExPress Freedom
- Women in the News
- Columns
- In Focus

- Readers' Opinions
- Email News
- What is RSS?

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- ENGLISH
- ESPAÑOL
- FRANÇAIS
- ARABIC
- DEUTSCH
- ITALIANO
- JAPANESE
- NEDERLANDS
- PORTUGUÊS
- SUOMI
- SVENSKA
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- TÜRKÇE

CLIMATE CHANGE: Early Warning Systems for the Coming Storm

By Stephen Leahy

GENEVA, Aug 31 (IPS) - Climate change is here. The challenge in Geneva this week is to find ways to help the world cope with a climate that will have more and worse extremes in terms of temperatures, floods, and storms.

More than 2,500 experts and policy-makers from 150 countries are attending the Aug. 31-Sep. 4 World Climate Conference to discuss how to improve weather forecasting and long-range seasonal weather projections, especially to help poor nations in areas such as agriculture.

"Until now, the way that we deliver climate information to some sectors has been ad hoc. What we need is a formal system that all people can trust to access vital information that can save their lives and protect property and economies," said Michel Jarraud, secretary-general of the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), which is convening the World Climate Conference this week in Geneva.

The WMO has proposed that a global climate services system be created to boost observations and research for monitoring the climate and new information tools that will provide sector- and regional-specific products and services, Jarraud told IPS.

The first two "World Climate Conferences" in 1979 and 1990 were organised by the WMO and played the key roles in the creation of the U.N. climate secretariat, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

This "Global Framework" system could help reduce losses caused by extreme weather and climate events such as heat waves, sandstorms, cyclones, drought and floods which will become more frequent and more intense as the climate continues to warm, he said.

"Extreme weather events and changing climatic conditions affect all of us, frequently resulting in humanitarian disasters and heavy losses," said Swiss President Hans-Rudolf Merz.

Better precipitation forecasts, hazard maps and early warning systems are crucial to reduce impacts and assist "decision-makers in their respective sectors like food security, water management, health care and tourism", he told delegates at the conference opening.

While people in developed countries take weather forecasting for granted, many regions do not have even basic three-day forecasts.

"All of Africa has fewer working weather stations than tiny Switzerland," said Walter Fust of the Global Humanitarian Forum, a Geneva-based NGO focused on collaborations to overcome key humanitarian challenges.

With more than 70 percent of Africans working in agriculture, access to good weather information is the most important way to help Africa cope with climate change, Fust told IPS.

"The climate has changed, the local people can no longer rely on their traditional knowledge," he stressed.

To overcome this, the Forum has created a Weather Info for All private-public partnership that uses the existing mobile telephone network as weather stations and to SMS the information to farmers. "Africa has at least 60 percent mobile coverage," Fust said.

Launched in June, they plan to install 5,000 automatic weather stations at cell phone tower sites across Africa. The first 19 stations have been deployed in the Lake Victoria region where 5,000 people die every year due to storms and accidents.

"It will only cost 30 million dollars to cover all of Africa," he said. Mobile companies Ericsson and Zain, along with Google, are participants and Fust is hopeful the money will be found to complete the network quickly.

"We often forget the significant human consequences of climate change," he said.

Kofi Annan, president of the Forum, told delegates that it is crucial to recognise that "weather ignores national borders and we need to work together to understand its complexities and challenges".

Coping or adapting to climate change requires high-quality early warning systems because by 2020, up to 250 million people in Africa will face growing shortages of water due to climate change. Gro Harlem Brundtland, special envoy of the U.N. secretary-general on climate change, told the conference.

The challenge is to communicate information about what to expect in a more efficient manner to decision makers at all levels, Brundtland said.

In reference to the "other climate conference" later this year in Copenhagen, where the world community hopes to forge an agreement to reduce the carbon dioxide emissions that are driving climate change, Brundtland warned



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that politics was pushing science aside. "Political leaders must be guided by the best available scientific knowledge," she stressed.

"We must mobilise political will at the highest level to act on what the science is telling us," she concluded. And "the science demands that we act boldly".

(END/2009)

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