

UN: War, Drought Devastates Afghanistan

Associated Press

January 29, 2003

Polluted drinking water. Toxic fumes from burning plastics. Deforestation and overgrazing. Hospital wastes including human organs dumped in gutters of streets.

Afghanistan's environment is so degraded following 25 years of war, drought and famine that conditions are "a major stumbling block" to the country's reconstruction, United Nations inspectors conclude in a report released Wednesday. Two dozen Afghan and Western scientists visited 73 urban and rural locations in 2002 for the U.N.'s Environmental Program.

Their report is the first comprehensive look since the 1970s at conditions in one of the world's poorest countries. In Kabul and other cities, disease epidemics remain a constant threat because only one in 10 people drink safe water, the report said. In Remote Mountain and desert villages, they found rampant deforestation; parched aquifers, soil erosion and pesticide pollution which they said could hamper agriculture for generations.

Further straining resources, 2 million refugees returned from Pakistan, Iran and other neighbours in 2002; another 1.5 million are expected to arrive this year. Afghan's minister of irrigation and environment said the U.N. report offers a blueprint for recovery, but it depends on significant foreign aid and investment only some of which may be included in the \$4.5 billion that foreign governments have pledged.

"It warns us of a future without water, forests, wildlife and clean air if environmental problems are not addressed in the reconstruction period," said Yusuf Nuristani.

The report found: in Kabul, the Kampani dump is located upstream of the city on the Kabul River, and similar dumps are located above Kandahar and Herat. Monsoon rains threaten to flush poisons into water supplies. Tests of the cities' drinking water show high levels of E.coli bacteria from sewage.

Kabul is losing 60 percent of its fresh water supply through leaky pipes and illegal use. In Herat, there are just 150 water taps; 15 of them work.

Solid wastes and plastics are burned routinely, sending clouds of toxins above neighbourhoods.

Medical wastes from hospitals including human organs and syringes are dumped in streets. Industrial sites including fuel refineries and factories making bricks, asphalt and batteries have virtually no safeguards.

In a Kabul shoe factory, researchers found children working without protection from toxic chemicals during 12-hour shifts. The children slept at their machines or in factory alcoves. In the countryside, satellite-imaging shows that conifer forests in southern provinces have been reduced by over half since 1978.

In two Northern provinces, pistachio woodlands covered 55 percent of the terrain and the nuts were an important export crop. Today virtually, no pistachio woodlands were found in the area. Sinking water tables and war damage have all but collapsed a network of underground irrigation canals and pumping stations, turning farms into moonscapes.