

## **Emerging Threats to International Security: Environment, Refugees, and Conflict\***

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*This paper is to anticipate emerging issues that challenge the international community. Borrowing from the concept of bipolarity between communist and capitalist system during the Cold War, the interacting dynamics of environmental change, refugee flows, and conflicts were here labeled as tripolarity, a destructive set of interactions which increases global insecurity. The end of the Cold War seemed to promise peace, but countries soon fell prey to the violence of renewed ethnic rivalries, nationalism, and self-determination. These violent conflicts perhaps have caused more environmental destruction and human suffering (e.g. death or refugee flows) than the old, ideological conflicts. Moreover, such environmental change and refugee flows have come to the fore in global politics, not only as a consequence but also as an emerging source of violent conflicts.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the traditional world order which was characterized by the ideological conflict between the Eastern and Western blocs, 'low politics' involving environmental and humanitarian issues was accorded a second priority. After the collapse of the Communist bloc, the world seems poised to grant a 'higher' priority to the role played by such 'lower' issues in the agenda for global peace. Despite increasing awareness that environmental decline both produces and is a product of conflict, little is known about the links between environment and conflict due to lack of conceptual clarity about what environmentally-induced conflict means and the inadequate evidence about the linkage. In the meantime, the objective of building a peaceful world order is challenged by the intensification of tribal combustion and ethnic conflicts which are now tearing apart numerous multiethnic societies. As ethnic conflicts engulf the post-Cold War world order, there seems neither enough resources nor enough energy for the world to make the concept of environmental conflicts lucid and operational or to explain them as an escalating peace-threatening factor. Once again, issues concerning environmental conflicts have been relegated to the world's back burner.

Another issue that has been left unaddressed in international politics is the assessment of environmentally induced population displacement. Since the 1970s, violent upheavals in less developed countries have produced massive refugee movements. In the year 2000 alone, there are more than 10 million refugees and 5 million internally displaced persons (UNHCR 2000). Meanwhile, people have also been forced to leave their homelands as much due to economic misery and environmental disruption as because of political oppression and civil violence. Overpopulation, land pressures, poverty, famine, epidemics, or natural disasters also produce large numbers of uprooted people, adding a new burden to an already grave global (political) refugee problem. It is estimated that 150 million people will be environmentally displaced persons by the year 2050. Yet, only those who have crossed international borders for political reasons have conventionally been designated as legitimate

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\* Portions of this paper are drawn from Shin-wha Lee, *Environment Matters: Conflicts, Refugees, and International Relations* (Seoul and Tokyo: WHDI Press, January 2001).

refugees. Neither the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol<sup>1</sup> have included this newly identified growing group, i.e. environmental refugees. Massive environmental refugee movements both within and among nations may prove to be a serious destabilizing force as displaced persons exacerbate pressures in the regions they occupy, which are often already overcrowded Third World cities or environmentally fragile areas of neighboring countries. Denied official refugee status, and therefore international refugee aid, desperate displaced communities may initiate and intensify violent conflicts.

This paper intends to advance the study of the political implications of environmental issues and related humanitarian concerns for displaced persons and refugees. Such lower issues may not yet be as critical a factor leading to violence as ideological issues were in the Cold War, or as ethnic conflicts are currently, but if neglected they may pass through a threshold of irreversibility and promote a continuing cycle of violent conflicts in the new millennium.

This study seeks to examine systematically the tripolar interactions among environmental change, refugees, and conflicts (a condition hereafter referred to as *tripolarity*). By analogy with the concept of bipolarity between communist and capitalist system, which defined the Cold War, the interacting dynamics of environmental change, refugee flows, and conflicts are here labeled tripolarity, a destructive set of interactions which increases insecurity and discourages the struggle for building a new Post-Cold War world order.

This initial attempt to build a framework of tripolarity is justified on both theoretical and practical grounds. From the theoretical perspective, studying the effects of tripolarity serves as an effective vehicle with which to link human communities and their environments in international politics. These are increasingly interdependent and one cannot be protected without the other. Yet the study of political action, whether violent or nonviolent, has focused on the extent to which acts against human beings or crimes against humanity (e.g. dictatorship, oppression, and genocide) lead to struggle between rulers who support the status quo and those who seek to revise political relations. Little attention has been devoted to the impact of acts carried out against nature and indirectly against people. For example, to what degree does ecocide catalyze its victims (i.e. environmental refugees) to take up violent political actions? Studying the consequences of tripolarity promotes an understanding of how violence against nature, as well as against human beings, affect strategies (both violent and nonviolent) of political mobilization by targeted groups.

In practical terms, an awareness of the negative implications of tripolarity can facilitate researchers and policy-makers to better appreciate environmentally induced population displacements and the conflicts caused by them. This new awareness may then compel the U.N. to expand its conventional definition of refugees to include environmentally displaced persons. Having achieved refugee status and appropriate international protection and aids, the environmental displaced can be discouraged from embracing violent action as a means of responding to ecocide. In addition, zero-sum situations between contending groups, in which one party's potential gain is another's loss amidst growing competition for scarce resources, can be minimized, if not avoided.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1951 Convention on refugees identifies refugee eligibility as those seeking asylum abroad and having 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of ... political opinion ... The Convention was amended as the Protocol in 1967.

## 2. TRIPOLARITY OF ENVIRONMENT, REFUGEES, AND CONFLICTS: A THEORETICAL INQUIRY

The theoretical examination of environmental change, refugees, and conflicts within the social sciences has been sparse. In order to understand the theory of tripolarity and its relationship to international politics, six basic questions must be posed: i) what are environmentally induced conflicts?; ii) how environmentally devastating can conflicts or wars be?; iii) how does environmental change produce refugees?; iv) what are the environmental implications of sudden refugee influxes and long-term residency of displaced populations in a host society?; v) to what extent do political conflicts generate refugee movements?; and vi) what are the effects of refugee flows and resettlements on political stability both at intra-and interstate level?

### 2.1. Environmental Change

Environmental change may be defined as the decline in the quantity or quality of renewable resources that occurs faster than the renewal of that resource by natural processes. This includes population-induced ecological stress, renewable resource scarcity, environmental degradation, natural or human induced disasters, drought and war induced famines often aggravated by political manipulation, and deliberate policies of displacement and resettlement. Ecocide refers to the deliberate destruction of the natural environment which in turn endangers human life. Often a wartime strategy, it is a major source of environmental degradation. Such environmental change has in turn generated displaced communities (i.e. environmental refugees) and environmentally induced conflicts (hereafter referred to as *eco* conflicts).

First, environmental refugees refer to those who have no choice but to leave their habitats for their very survival because of natural and human-induced ecological disasters and environmental change; or those who are internally displaced or compelled to cross borders as a result of harmful development plans, government ecocide, or a government's rehabilitation or resettlement plans which discriminate against specific groups.

Yet, identifying environmental refugees is a very challenging task, not only because of the difficulty of distinguishing them from environmental migrants, but also because many environmental refugees are also influenced by economic misery and/or political, ethnic, and military conflicts, just as many political and economic refugees are influenced by environmental disruption. While some refugees are exclusively the victims of environmental degradation, others may be 'multiplicable.' In many African countries with few resources and fragile governments, economic affliction and environmental disruption are generally aggravated by political unrest. Although nature-triggered catastrophes in recent years caused poor grain harvests in North Korea, years of an inefficient communist system controlling economy and agriculture and enormous military expenditure at the cost of the civilian sector are largely responsible for the North Korean food crisis. In this case it is extremely hard to make distinctions between environmental refugees and others. In fact, North Korean famine victims who fled into China or countries other than South Korea are now trapped by political and legal constraints, which were set for the sake of maintaining the order and security of sovereign states (Lee 1999). The process by which these environmentally affected populations become refugees should be carefully traced by examining the interaction of political factors (e.g. dubious government policies) with the ecological factors (natural and

human-induced disasters) which create environmental refugees. Additionally, the international contribution, both negative and positive, to generating environmental refugees needs to be noted.

Second, despite increasing awareness that environmental decline both produces and is a product of conflict, little is known about the relationship of population and environmental dynamics to conflict, i.e. eco conflict, due to lack of conceptual clarity about what eco conflict means and the inadequate evidence about the linkage. Not until recently, very seldom have attempts been made to explore the causes and dynamics of eco conflict.<sup>2</sup> Homer-Dixon (1991 and 1994) and the members of his Project on Environment, Population, and Security at the University of Toronto (one of the most prominent and controversial in this subject area) claim resource scarcity as a main cause that can lead to three types of conflict: simple scarcity conflict (where at least two states or groups engage in violent conflict or warfare), group identity conflict (where groups are displaced from a resource scarce region to another region, resulting in tension and conflict), or relative deprivation conflict (where one group feels deprived of a resource relative to other groups). Many others have also developed models and frameworks of how environmental factors lead to conflict. Still, there is much of the controversy over how to address the two central shortcomings, the conceptual and the empirical (Diehl and Gleditsch 2001). It is thus important to clarify the concepts of eco conflicts by explaining how they proceed. The following stages can provide an analytical framework to understand how a society passes to reach the level of eco conflict:

*Stage I (Overpopulation Pressure):* Population pressures increase due to dense human settlements, and stem from high birth rates, increasing urbanization, and the continuing influx of foreign migrants.

*Stage II (Growing Demands):* As population increases, human activities, per capita resource consumption, standard of living, and human wastes escalate. Additionally, the average individual's level of consumption or affluence is raised further by resource consumption and pollution-generating technology development.

*Stage III (Environmental Stress):* Increasing population and their growing demands increase resource shortages and environmental damage through a vicious cycle – when the resource supply becomes scarce or less accessible, then it requires excessively high costs and greater environmental damage in order to provide resources for additional people.

*Stage IV (Competition and Tension):* Environmental stress, including scarcities and degradation, instigate competition among the affected population (local people and migrants) within a society, generating political and social tension. During times of competition over ecological resources, the affected country's people usually become more self-conscious and self-assertive of their group identity.

*Stage V (Distribution Disorder):* Growing competition over scarce resources places regimes under heavy stress concerning the 'orderly' distribution of insufficient resource supplies among an increasing population. The greater the scarcity, the more likely is a breakdown of the distribution order. This is because advantaged groups, often including government elite members, wield their power to monopolize the valued at the expense of other groups.

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<sup>2</sup> For recent discussion on eco conflicts, see Homer-Dixon (1994), Lee (1997a), Daudney and Matthew (1999); Diehl and Gleditsch (2001) and articles from *Journal of Peace Research* May 1998 (special issue on environmental conflict) and the reports from Environmental Change and Security Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center (<http://ecsp.si.edu>).

*Stage VI (Environmental Destruction):* Without appropriate measures to prevent overuse and pollution of renewable resources, ecological stress passes a threshold of irreversibility. Even if the environmental condition is partially reversible, it will be a prohibitively long and costly process.

*Stage VII (Economic Decline):* Environmental destruction such as depletion of fish stocks, decreases agricultural and industrial production and causes a lowering of average living standards and further impoverishment and malnutrition within developing societies.

*Stage VIII (Social Disintegration):* Normally, environmental destruction and economic woes have the following social effects before producing violent conflict: disruption of authoritative political, financial, and legal institutions and accepted social relations; the spread of relative deprivation and frustration due to unequal distribution of both ecological resources and economic goods; and population displacement including mass migration of rural workers into cities or across the national borders.

*Stage IX (Eco Conflict):* Environmental destruction and its disruptive effects not only create conflicts but also protract ongoing internal disorders. Since conflict is a 'process' and not a one-time event, environmental issues can add a new dimension to enduring social or ethno-political disputes.

To summarize, eco conflict refers to the process by which people take collective action (nonviolent protest or rebellion) against governments or other groups to protect themselves when they perceive that their well being or survival is threatened by environmental change, or unequal access to scarce resources. Aspects of eco conflict can renew old conflicts or substantially protract ongoing ones.

## 2.2. Refugee Flows and Settlement

In defining the links between refugee flows and conflicts, a general proposition is that refugees are generated by government repression or persecution, domestic conflicts, or regional wars. Most existing studies on refugees and conflicts have focused on the 'one-way' approach to explain when and why conflicts produce refugees, not vice versa. Refugee problems, however, are not only consequences of conflicts or wars, but increasingly are causal factors, sometimes even the primary cause of conflicts. Refugee flows sometimes incorporate guerrilla fighters who exploit sanctuaries as strategic sites from which to launch attacks on their government. Noncombatant refugees may also become 'unwitting agents' as well as passive victims of conflicts. The refugee problem is no longer a matter of simple humanitarian tragedy. Their presence has become a real or potential threat to the host's internal stability, global security, and the emerging new world order, thus repeating a vicious cycle: massive flows of refugees fleeing political persecution or wars increase tensions and escalate conflicts in the regions where they settle, and in turn contribute to new causes of flight.

At least three effects can be observed when it comes to refugee movements and settlements. First, the impact of refugees on communal conflicts within the country of asylum is significant. Refugees often increase the rate which land and resources are being used up, and this frequently generates tensions between newcomers and native populations of the areas where they are concentrated. As the percentage of refugees in relation to the total population of a host country increases, both refugees and natives are propelled together under conditions of greater competition for scarce goods, land, resources, and jobs. Refugees also increase demands for economic assistance and social services from the host government

and local peoples. If domestic resources rather than international funds must meet their needs, resentment on the part of the receiving government and population that must bear the costs will be heightened. Regardless of whether refugees are related to the host's population or not, a sudden, massive influx of refugee populations causes destabilizing factors in the country of asylum, which often precipitate social and political instability and strong pressures on the host government to repatriate refugees or restrict their inflow. In addition, the extended sojourn of displaced communities has attracted not only humanitarian attention and the need to acquire relief resources, but has challenged the security of host countries and even whole regions.

Second, refugee flows can cause conflicts between host and source countries. Not infrequently, refugees are considered an instrumental vehicle with which the powerful countries can attain their foreign-policy objectives. When refugees flee from a neighboring country which does not establish amicable relations with the receiving state, refugees can be well received since the host government perceives them as a lever with which to pursue its national interests against the rival country. The receiving country thus forms alliances with refugee groups and supports their attempt to transform the political situation in their country of origin. A host government also welcomes kindred refugees from the neighboring country because these refugees can serve as allies. Yet, most governments are reluctant to host refugees because they usually do not wish to complicate their relations with the refugees' home country. As a consequence, some host governments have closed their borders to unwanted refugees, have judged asylum seekers as illegal immigrants, and have attempted forcible repatriation. Refugee movements carry the spillover effects, often raising political and military tensions between the recipient country and the neighboring country of origin. There is the risk that the host will become involved in the conflict between refugees and their government, particularly if refugees represent a political or communal minority group in their origin country. Even when refugee populations consist solely of noncombatants who are uninterested in political or militant action, there is a risk that their presence along the border will raise tensions between host and source countries.

In short, the host government's responses to refugee flows from other countries are greatly affected by the relations between sending and receiving countries. If there is a tradition of hostility between the countries, tensions over refugee flows may lead to more intensified conflicts as the presence of refugees becomes long-term or a permanent resettlement. If the countries have shared a cooperative history, the host government, not wishing to upset its ally, is likely to use force against refugees, either by forcible relocation within the host country, or border controls to keep most or all of them out. However, irresponsible fighters in the host country can target refugees and their country of origin as scapegoats for popular discontent. The result can be a militant nationalism that destroys the cooperative relationship that once existed between neighboring countries.

Third, refugee influx contributes to demographic and ecological strains and economic dislocation. Given the degree of global environmental damage, the refugee contribution to environmental degradation may be minimal. But no matter where refugees flee, sudden and unexpected increases in population can cause the disruption of the delicate ecological balance of their new region. Such environmental disruption generates economic and social strains and can wreak havoc in the country of asylum. This is true even for the highly industrialized countries of Western Europe and North America, which usually cater far better to the needs of their refugees. Still, these developed societies are much less susceptible to environmental stress triggered by mass refugee flows and settlement. In many Third World

societies, a sharp increase in population densities in refugee sites places tremendous burdens on the physical environment which must already contend with the natural population increase. Combined with the large refugee presence, prolonged refugee population stays often lead to environmental destruction around refugee camps and settlement areas.

The environmental impact of the large refugee presence on poorer countries is great. Although the ultimate causes of environmental deterioration in refugee-receiving areas are similar to those existing in normal communities of high population densities, the effects are more startling. This is because refugee camps and settlements are often built in environmentally fragile areas. In fact, the majority of refugees today are living in the world's poorest countries. Under normal circumstances, people can choose where to move in search of more environmentally sound areas of resettlement. In the case of refugees, however, such choices of movement are not usually available. Often they are too busy and desperate fleeing for their very survival to enjoy options. In addition, refugees, indiscriminately utilize limited resources in the receiving community as they have few incentives to preserve the regions that do not belong to them. In sum, large concentrations of refugee population in fragile environments lead refugees to utilize the meager resources available in the regions close to their camps and resettlement zones, a process which accelerates environmental degradation. This in turn poses additional hardships on poor local host populations competing for scarce natural resources and possibly forces them to migrate to other areas. Ironically, the search for solutions to environmental degradation which produces refugees in one country can generate other refugee-producing environmental changes in a receiving nation.

### 2.3. Ethnopolitical Conflicts

The demise of Soviet Bloc communism seemed to promise peace as bipolar tensions melted away, but countries soon fell prey to the violence of renewed ethnic rivalries, nationalism, and self-determination. The intensification of tribal combustion and ethnopolitical conflicts (i.e. the state of open conflict with states or civil war which is conducted between ethnic groups that have politically mobilized to redress their grievances and promote the group's common interests) are now tearing apart numerous multiethnic societies and imperiling many Third World regions.

Ethnopolitical conflicts in the world today are not all the same, but, rather, fall into different categories according to the objectives of the contending parties. First, ethnic strife breaks out when an ethnic group seeks a separate political entity against the will of its government which opposes the group. The main political objective for the group is 'exit' for independence and autonomy (e.g. Chechnya in Russia, and Kosovo Albanians in Yugoslavia). Second, conflict between minorities and the state can occur as the former's demands for regional autonomy or greater rights (civil, political, economic, and cultural) within one united state encounter the latter's indifference or refusal. By raising their 'voices,' indigenous peoples aim at protecting their lands, resources, and culture from outsiders' encroachments. Also, minorities' voices pressure to promote their interest within existing political systems (e.g. Afar ethnic minorities vs. the Somali-dominated government in Djibouti). Third, communal rivalries between ethnic groups within the state cause conflicts when they compete for access to, and control of, political power, economic opportunities, territory, and scarce resources. Such ethnic tensions between groups are often intensified by the government's stance in favor of the tribe which is connected to elites or the pro-

government group.<sup>3</sup> Fourth, violence occurs when the government and dominant groups seek to forcibly conquer, annihilate, assimilate, or remove other ethnic minorities (e.g. 'ethnic cleansing' campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Rwandan genocide in 1994). Fifth, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism is becoming a source of conflict.<sup>4</sup>

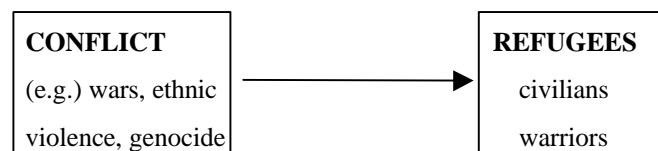
Historically, communal or ethnic conflicts are not new. Since the end of the Cold War, however, Third World ethnopolitical conflicts have increased in frequency and intensity. Among 110 armed conflicts or wars<sup>5</sup> during 1989-1999, only six were inter-state conflicts and wars. During the same period, there have been 104 intrastate conflicts (Wallensteen & Sollenberg 2000), mainly resulted from ethnic and religious rivalries, resurgent nationalism, or the struggle for state control. The escalation of communal or ethnic conflicts in the Third World is rapidly becoming a main source of humanitarian crises such as genocide and massive refugee flows. These violent conflicts have perhaps caused even more human suffering than the old, ideological conflicts. Numbers of refugees who fled ethnic violence and related repression also have risen during the 1990s (Gurr 2000).

### 3. DYNAMICS OF TRIPOLARITY

#### 3.1. Interactions of the Environment, Refugee and Conflict

The preceding section has discussed the multifarious factors explaining interactions between environmental change, refugee movements, and conflicts. The logical consequence of clarifying the complexity of tripolarity is an ability to anticipate a new dimension of global insecurity. Given the aforementioned arguments, six theoretical propositions can be formulated to understand tripolarity.

**[P1: C → R]** Refugees are victims of political conflicts and persecution.



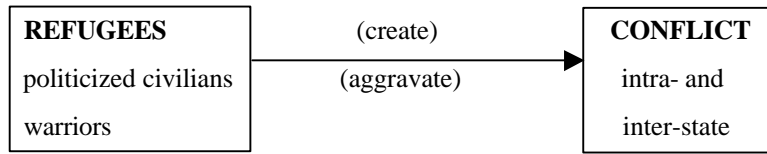
<sup>3</sup> For instance, in Kenya, President Daniel arap Moi, trying to prove that multi-party system would cause ethnic violence, continue to provoke ethnic violence between his Kalenjin group and other ethnic communities, including the majority Kikuyu.

<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the theocratic regime of Iran, Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East have sought to establish governments based on the rule of Islamic law. The resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism is usually anti-Western, poses a threat not only to the region affected but to international security. The revival of Hindu nationalism in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and India is likely to escalate communal conflicts throughout the South Asia region.

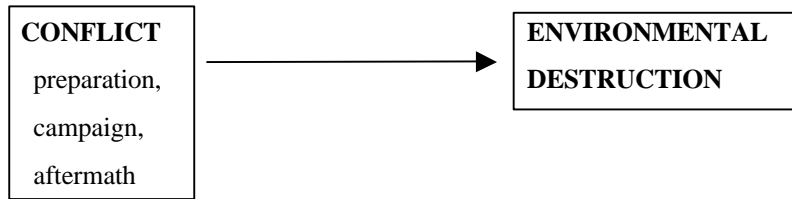
<sup>5</sup> 'Wars' refer to those cases with at least 1,000 battle-related death per year, while 'conflicts' refers to those cases with at least 25 (but less than 1,000) battle-related death per year (Wallensteen & Sollenberg 2000).



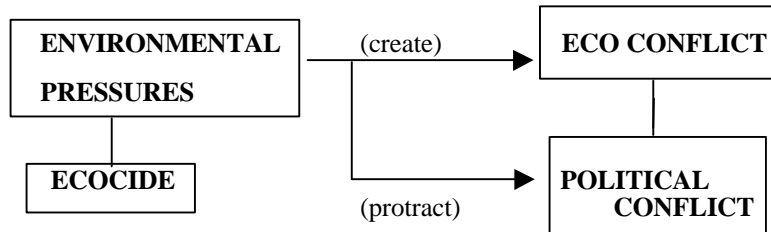
[P2: R → C] The increase in refugee pressures provokes ethnic strife within host countries and further creates and exacerbates conflicts between the sending and receiving countries.



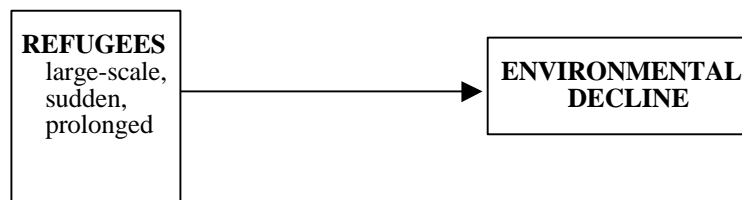
[P3: C → E] Political conflicts (ongoing military campaign, preparations and consequences of warfare) cause environmental destruction in the affected countries.



[P4: E → C] Environmental pressures (e.g. competition for scarce resources by ever-growing population; and transboundary resource allocation and pollution) create an intra- or interstate war (i.e. eco conflict), renew old conflicts, or protract existing political conflicts (e.g. ethnopolitical conflict). Government policies of ecocide (the destruction of the natural environment which in turn endangers human life) also lead to the violent prosecution of conflicts by affected communities.

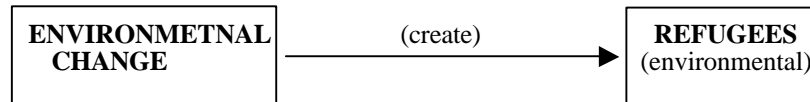


[P5: R → E] Refugee flows and resettlements promote the disruption of the ecological balance in areas where they are concentrated.



[P6: E → R] Environmental change (e.g. natural and human-made disasters, resource scarcities, ecological degradation, ecocide, and dubious policy-induced displacement and resettlement) leads to refugee flows.

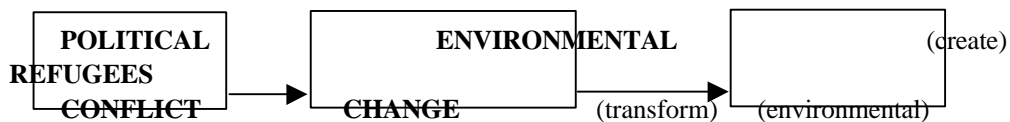
(situation 1) Environmental change directly causes refugee flows.



(situation 2) Environmental change triggers or prolongs political conflicts, which in turn produce or multiply refugee flows.



(situation 3) Political conflict results in environmental change which in turn triggers refugee flows. This effect also discourages political refugees (who have fled political conflicts) from returning home even after their motive for flight is resolved, thus transforming them into environmental refugees.<sup>6</sup>



This brief review of the six propositions displays how tripolarity functions: environmental change is a devastating offspring of human warfare while also being a source of conflicts within and among states; refugees are not only harmless scapegoats but also unwitting actors of political conflict and violence, and warriors among these refugees in exile can be subversive perpetrators of conflict; and refugees are both passive victims and active participants in environmental destruction (see Figure 1).

### 3.2. The Role of the State

No matter what factors are responsible for short-term or protracted conflict, government responses to the underlying causes and to conflict itself are crucial in determining the escalation or de-escalation of conflicts. In order to understand the role of the state (including the effectiveness of political governance and the use of political coercion or accommodation), it is helpful to divide countries by regime type: democracy, democratizing, autocracy, and anarchic.

First, Western democracies have enjoyed relative success in discouraging disputes from flaring into open conflicts by accommodating political demands. Of course, raise tensions

<sup>6</sup> For detailed discussion on the distinction among environmental refugees and environmental migrants, see Lee (1997b).

among minority groups, and thus protests, are prevalent throughout these countries (e.g. United States, United Kingdom, and France). Pluralistic and democratic responses (e.g. reform, accommodation, and regional autonomy) render violence avoidable or, if unavoidable, relatively tractable.

Second, democratizing states<sup>7</sup> are more complex. On one hand, Gene Sharp (1973) observed that the political power of a coercive regime may be destroyed by the withdrawal of cooperation by its citizens. Based on this insight, various studies of nonviolent struggles suggest that nonviolence sanctions, in comparison to violent ones, can be effective in the face of oppression and genocide. Nonviolent strategies have often been more successful than violent ones in altering government policies or overthrowing repressive regimes. In fact, the democratization process in the Philippines (1984 and 2000), South Korea (1987), Eastern European countries (late 1980s), Indonesia (1998), and Peru (2000) has especially benefited from nonviolent 'people power.' On the other hand, the process of democratization, or the breakup of authoritarian rule, in Soviet bloc countries and other parts of the world has been accompanied by struggles between ethnic groups for political power. Since very few mono-ethnic states exist, there is a great likelihood that suppressed or latent ethnic rivalries will flare up after the fall of authoritarian governments. For example, if the previous government favored, or was dominated by, a specific ethnic group at the cost of others, ethnic tensions are likely to escalate into open conflict. Such ethnic conflict easily becomes intractable since demands for retribution against or punishment of the old regime will take on ethnic overtones (de Nevers 1993) and the targeted groups will resist with whatever means available. The result will be tragic not only because it costs many human lives but because the responses of democratizing states may result in a return to an autocratic political system.

Third, in multi-ethnic societies, inequalities between different ethnic groups coincided with the dominant group's capabilities to hold power. A state's maximization of power in the development process (referred to as dictatorial or authoritarian development) and its expanded role in the economic sector, usually results in the immediate transfer of the economic (or eco) conflict over the distribution of resources and rewards to a political (or ethnic) conflict. For example, the decades-long ethno-religious rebellion of southerners against the northern government in Sudan was further complicated when landless disadvantaged northerners supported southerners. The more that disadvantaged groups experienced political coercion and discrimination, the more likely they are to take up arms against their oppressors. But under autocratic rule, extreme oppression tends to stifle conflict by inhibiting all opposition (e.g. North Korea and Cuba). Actually, there is a body of literature on revolution that finds that it is not caused by extreme oppression but rather by political opportunities following partial reforms and rising expectation (Davies 1962 and 1969; Tilly 1978; Rule 1988; Goldstone; Gurr and Moshiri 1991). In this way, the volatile situation of many democratizing countries following autocracy can be understood. And irrespective of whether a government uses extreme oppression, absolute poverty or desperation can result in a lack of political action because people are preoccupied by mere survival. Still, as UN Peacekeeping Commander General Romeo Dallaire (in Rwanda) said, 'when people suffer so much, and in many cases have so little to lose, their instincts tend to

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<sup>7</sup> According to Diamond (2001), these nations can be considered 'swing states' as democratic institutions exist in these countries but their movement toward liberal and consolidated democracy may be interrupted by military coup or economic recession.

come to the surface faster.’<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, as seen in the case of Somalia and Rwanda, the absence of government control, or anarchic conditions, has allowed opposing ethnic groups or tribes to mercilessly fight each other and attack defenseless civilians who are killed because of their ethnicity.

In short, the devastating potential for tripolarity is greatest when no political will and commitment exists to counter it. This is true particularly in the case of least developed countries where the objectives of rulers focus primarily on regime survival. Incapacitated by overpopulation, ecological stress, underdevelopment, massive refugee flows and resettlements, and ethnic and civil strife, elites in the poorest countries place a higher value on the maintenance of the state as opposed to the well being of their citizen. To secure the power and interests of rulers, political coercion is often employed since coercive measures are the only available means for the state to assure its existence. The result is to plunge into a downward spiral of tripolarity.

### 3.3. Unconventional Aspects of Tripolarity

Although, as suggested above, the elements of tripolarity flow in all direction, the scholarly literature and policy papers have thus far heavily emphasized [P1] and [P3]. First, only those in search of refuge outside of their countries of origin, fleeing for political reasons (e.g. persecution or inter/intra-state conflicts) are eligible to apply for the internationally-accepted refugee status, as stated in the 1951 UN Convention and 1967 UN Protocol (P1: C→R). Many scholars and researchers have focused on building a model to explain why and when people become refugees and on clarifying differences between refugees and migrants. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the U.S. Committee for Refugees, have also attempted to quantify the level of refugee flow and their resettlement or repatriation. Secondly, academic literature and policy papers have expressed concern about environmental consequences of war. As witnessed in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Cambodia, wars result in the destruction of the living landscape, civilian facilities, and dependent human livelihood (P3: C→E). Such ecocidal effects of war, it is argued, are not only derived from ongoing warfare but also the preparation for war, rendering affected regions unlivable.

However, it is worth noting under what circumstances we can expect unconventional pathways of tripolarity, i.e. environmental change as a source of refugee flows and conflicts, (E→R/C); and refugees as sources of environmental change and conflict (R→E/C). This discussion must incorporate the three issues which are identified above as emerging issues in post-Cold War conflicts (i.e. demographic and environmental pressure, refugee crisis, and the role of the state). We have discussed how demographic and ecological pressures in a society are likely to lead to tensions and competition for limited resources. In this case, an unconventional aspect (E→C) can directly trigger conflicts, but many other factors intervene. Without specified objectives, grievances, and organized leadership, competition leads to scattered violent acts, not reaching a sustained scale. If this is the case in a multi-ethnic society, however, such tensions and competition have greater chances of developing into full-scale conflicts among different groups within a particular region or country, for those

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<sup>8</sup> This information was acquired in an interview with Mr. Dallaire in the U.N. Headquarters in New York, in October 1999, while the author served as a Special Advisor to Independent Inquiry into the actions of the United Nations during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

pressures intensify group identity and mobilization for political action.

Here, the role of the state is also crucial. Government inaction (or inadequate action) in response to environmental disasters or preparation for them can promote refugee-producing environmental changes, while government action (ill-conceived development plans and population resettlement to the detriment of minorities) can further exacerbate tensions between different groups over limited resources and lands, thus leading to conflicts. In short, under conditions in which environmental (demographic and ecological) stress coincides with sudden, large-scale, or prolonged refugee flows/presence within a heterogeneous society, combined with the failure of political governance (by both sending and receiving countries), unconventional pathways of tripolarity are greatest. When these are combined with conventional sequences (conflicts that produce refugees and devastate the environment), the result is to plunge into a downward spiral of tripolarity.

#### 4. THE CASE OF SUDAN AND BANGLADESH

The goal of the case studies is to examine whether the causal links specified in the theoretical sections are in fact supported by real-world observation. In this study, the Republic of Sudan and the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh will serve as the cases to provide empirical support for the foregoing arguments on tripolarity, with particular emphasis on whether environmental change and refugee flows are independent sources of conflict or rather add a new dimension to existing conflicts. Each case comports with the dynamics of tripolarity, the role of state in tripolarity, and the violent response by affected communities. In addition, there are obvious differences between the two countries which will facilitate comparative analysis. In regard to natural disasters, for example, Bangladesh is more affected by floods while Sudan suffer from severe droughts. In terms of the role of government in triggering ecocide, the people of Bangladesh suffer from dubious state development projects which favor elites while Sudanese are the victims of civil war or more direct ecocide policies.<sup>9</sup>

##### 4.1. Background of the Crisis in Sudan and Bangladesh

Sudan is a microcosm incorporating numerous complex problems of post-colonialism, including ethnic and religious cleavages, dictatorial rule, lack of political legitimacy, resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism, economic decay, poverty, environmental degradation, persistent droughts, massive famine, long-running civil war, and refugee exodus and influx.

Geographically, Sudan is the Africa' largest country with an area of 2.5 million square kilometers, slightly more than one-quarter the size of the United States. The country's total land area includes 5.2 percent of arable land and 19 percent of forest area. Demographically, Sudan is located at the crossroads of Arab northern Africa and the sub-Saharan black Africa. Ethnically, the Sudanese population is heterogeneous to a great degree.<sup>10</sup> Ethnic groupings are based on cultural and linguistic similarity and on geographic proximity.

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<sup>9</sup> Since the primary focus of this paper is on a theoretical inquiry of tripolarity, the discussion of case studies will be limited to summarizing comparative observations of Sudan and Bangladesh..

<sup>10</sup> According to the 1956 census (the only one conducted to date which gathered information on ethnic on ethnic origin), there are 19 major ethnic groups and 597 sub-ethnic groups.

The ethnic, regional, religious, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity of Sudan is best represented in the dichotomy between northerners and southerners. While the Arabized and Islamized north (with two thirds of the total Sudanese land) has been politically, economically, and culturally dominant, the underdeveloped south constitutes black African who are mostly Christians or animists. Over the centuries, contacts between northerners and southerners were hostile. North-south encounters were mostly comprised of: i) pre-colonial invasions by Arab tribes who raided the south for slaves and booty; ii) intervention by the British power at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and iii) incursions by successive post-colonial governments in Khartoum. Such undesirable contacts only aggravated the north-south dualism and consolidated the disadvantaged southerners' group identity against northerners. It is thus no surprise to note that for 35 out of its 45 years of independence, Sudan has been driven by the Africa's longest civil war between Arab Muslim northerners and African Christian southerners. The most recent phase of Sudanese civil war broke out in 1983, when the Khartoum regime attempted to transform the country into an Islamic state. Southerners have firmly asserted their tribal identity against discrimination and rejected assimilation with northerners.

With the complexities of civil war in the Sudan, teeming with intractable issues, the prospects for a united Sudan seem not be realistic and instead seem to give the Sudanese only one choice: partition (hopefully with economic cooperation and shared services). Yet, the north-south split entails a high risk of opening a 'Pandora's box' leading to a full-fledged civil war among different southern ethnic groups. Also, their political 'divorce' can cause a domino effect, serving as a precedent for other African countries that experience hostilities between communal contenders. The result could be continued fragmentation of the African continent.

Bangladesh, with a land area of 144,000 square kilometers and a population of 125 million, is one of the world's most densely populated nations. Geographically, Bangladesh features low-lying tropical terrain on the combined deltas of three major rivers, the Ganges-Padma, the Brahmaputra-Jamuna, and the Meghna, and is mostly surrounded by India. Almost one third of the land is under water during a normal rainy season (from June to September) and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is the country's only upland area. The country has long been susceptible to natural disasters and environmental degradation and the magnitude of disasters has mounted in recent times. Ethnically, Bangladesh is relatively homogeneous compared to other South Asian countries. Some 98 percent of the populations are Bengalis (mostly Sunni Muslims), while an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 Biharis still live in Bangladesh. In addition, about one percent of the country's population consists of tribal peoples, known as *Adivasis* (27 to 36 different tribes by ethnographers).<sup>11</sup> Among *Adivasis* residing in the CHT (10 percent of the country's total area), the Chakma (whose religion is Buddhist and language Pali) comprise the largest tribal population.

The history of Bengali intrusion into the CHT dates back to the 17th century when the *Adivasis* were forced to withdraw into the upper hills. During British colonial rule the CHT *Adivasis* enjoyed special status with considerable protection and autonomy. The difficulties of the CHT *Adivasis* began with the partition of India in 1947. Although CHT peoples (almost totally non-Muslim) wanted to join India, the area was incorporated into East Pakistan and the Pakistani government, thus opening the area to economic exploitation and

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<sup>11</sup> Despite their religious and racial differences, the *Adivasis* share strong bonds with each other rather than with the majority Bengali peoples.

an influx of Bengali Muslim, annulled their special status.<sup>12</sup> After the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, the situation was further aggravated. Guerrilla warfare by the indigenous armed force, *Shanti Bahini*, began in 1975 when a tribal request for the recovery of their former autonomous status and the prohibition of further settlement in CHT by outsiders was rejected by the central government.

#### 4.2. Comparative Observations of Sudan and Bangladesh

##### *Political Factors*

The first general observation drawn from the case analyses of Sudan and Bangladesh is that despite this study's attempt to switch emphasis to unconventional pathways of tripolarity, their crises can be attributed in substantial part to conventional problems: political reasons (e.g. the failure of political governance, the use of coercion, minority groups' resistance or pursuit of self-determination, and ethnic rivalries) contribute to the intensification of conflict and therefore massive refugee exoduses.

Sudan's civil war is characterized as an ethno-religious conflict. Unless Shari'a (Islamic) law is repealed, the conflict between the northern government and southern rebels will not be resolved by non-military means. Also, inter-factional fighting between Dinka tribes and non-Dinkas within the south has emphasized the ethnic feature of the war. Even if the north-south war ends, either by the north's concession or the south's secession or defeat, the south will probably fall prey to tribal clashes. In Bangladesh, its independence war, which was sparked by the genocidal aggression of West Pakistani forces against Bengalis, generated millions of refugees from East Bengal to India in 1970. Post-independence Bangladeshi governments have also failed to accommodate minorities' and instead have encouraged Bengalis' resettlement into the CHT, thus driving the dispossessed indigenous people to form the *Shanti Bahini* insurgency.

##### *Environmental Factors*

Aspects of eco conflict have been noticeably protracted by the Sudanese ethno-religious war, making it a more intractable conflict. 'Desert encroachment,' or severe dryland degradation, has long been an obstacle to the livelihoods of northern Sudanese and eventually caused them to relocate southward. This overall phenomenon resulting from the country's condition of 'too little water,' in turn resulted in population pressures and land overexploitation, escalated competition for resources, and intensified ethnic identities and hostilities in central Sudan.<sup>13</sup> These tensions have been largely attributed in this study to policy failure or the failure of politics. Inadequate government response to drought-related (or war-related) famines and the blocking of emergency food relief has turned into a major humanitarian issue around the world. Government action also responsible for the ecological aspects of Sudan's crisis. Advantaged groups such as government leaders and wealthy landlords monopolized resources at the cost of the majority, leading to a chain effect of environmental destruction, economic decline, social disintegration, population displacement (internal and environmental refugees), and protracted conflict. In brief, the Sudanese

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<sup>12</sup> In addition, the construction of the gigantic Kaptai Dam and creation of the Karnafuli reservoir in the 1960s devastated the livelihood of indigenous people.

<sup>13</sup> The greater environmental stress and competition among affected populations, the more self-conscious and self-assertive of their group identity will people become (Gurr 1993).

experience suggest that the tripolarity of environment-refugee-conflict is a contributing or facilitating force protracting ethnic disturbances, even though it is not a primary source.

In comparison, the case of Bangladesh provides a clear example of how environmental decline and social tensions result directly from population density. Overpopulated areas generate extreme land pressures, economic privation, and vulnerability to natural disasters, thus inducing Bengali people to migrate to the CHT in southern Bangladesh. But relocation did not provide a solution, and instead caused a collision with tribal peoples who traditionally resided in the areas, escalating after 1975 into a violent ethnic conflict. The resentment of tribal people against Bengali encroachment on their lands (environmental pressures) has obscured differences among different tribes and consolidated their pan-tribal group identity, thus triggering rebellion against the 'Bengalization' of their lands.

#### *Refugee Factors*

In Sudan, the refugee crises both the exodus of Sudanese and the influx of foreigners (e.g. Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees), were more closely related to politically-induced humanitarian tragedies, rather than a result of environmental insecurity in settled areas. Refugees' flight is closely related to the political situation in their country of origin. Ethiopian and Eritrean refugee 'floods' in eastern Sudan were not so much a source of, but rather were a result of conflict. Yet, their long presence has often been perceived as a threat to Sudanese political stability. Massive refugee influxes (both foreign and internally displaced) have caused detrimental environmental effects in arid northeastern and central Sudan due to population concentration, overuse of water, overcutting of trees, and land overexploitation. Also, drought- and famine-hit environmental refugees (fleeing from Sudan, to Sudan, or within Sudan) have often fled their habitats when political and environmental factors occur simultaneously. For instance, Sudanese refugee flows generated by the civil war have been exacerbated by environmental degradation due to drought and large-scale mechanized schemes. In addition, refugee-producing environmental destruction has often resulted from wars and government ecocide.

In the meantime, Bangladeshi refugees have played an active role in shaping ethnopolitical conflicts at both the intra- and interstate level. Within the country, overpopulation, poverty, and flood-stricken environmental refugees (mostly Bengali people), both by government resettlement and by their own volition, were the principal source of conflicts in the CHT. Across the border, millions of Bengali environmental refugees who fled overpopulation and poverty, together with war-stricken CHT political refugees, have not only exacted a heavy environmental toll in India but promoted or exacerbated ethnic conflicts in northeast India's states of Tripura and Assam.<sup>14</sup> In addition, India's operation of the Farraka Barrage, with an aim to maximize water withdrawals during dry seasons for its development, in turn disrupted downstream Bangladesh's ecosystem where the affected population has suffered from ecosystem destruction and the loss of livelihood. The victims became environmental refugees, many of them crossing the border to join millions of other Bangladeshi refugees who were already in India. As evidence by the precedents of Tripura

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<sup>14</sup> The implication of large-scale illegal migration, or refugee flows, is grave for the security of India. Northeast India (where the majority of Bangladeshis settled) is afflicted by the massive inflow of foreigners, triggering or aggravating ethnic conflict. Historically, northeast India was sparsely populated. Regardless of varying details, the insurgencies in northeast India share an underlying factor: safeguarding tribal society and culture and deterring non-tribal settlement. In this context, the role and importance of Tripura and Assam provinces acquires added emphasis.



and Assam, this massive influx of outsiders carries a great potential for ethnic conflicts throughout West Bengal, which will undermine India's security and development.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In order to break the cycle of tripolarity (i.e. massive flows of political and environmental refugees aggravating communal conflicts, which in turn brings forth another enormous wave of refugees), to prevent to unnecessary loss of lives, and to protect the displaced and dispossessed, immediate, coordinated, and sustained action is needed, such as humanitarian intervention coordinated by the United Nations. Political realities, however, often make such international community-led intervention in gross human rights violations, domestic conflicts, environmental damaging policies, and population displacement unfeasible or ineffective. Massive population movements are largely due to environmental decline and harmful governmental policies (including ecocide), as well as physical conflict and political persecution within a sovereign state. Since international law is founded on the notion that nation-states have mutually exclusive jurisdiction over segments of territory and clusters of population, the issue of sovereignty exacerbates the contributing pressures to population movements. A sovereign state rarely allows external interference in its domestic affairs.

Overall, it is unfortunate that while the essential objective of a state is to provide its citizens with security, government elites are often prepared to violate this objective in order to maintain their regime. It is difficult for the U.N. to take timely action not only because of limits on intervention in internal issues of a sovereign state but also because the U.N. must act with the consent of member states. It is not easy to achieve consent when sovereignty is the issue. In light of the growing worldwide environmental refugee problem (along with political refugees), which often triggers or intensifies communal conflicts and threaten regional stability, however, these pressures are no longer manifested primarily within the domestic jurisdiction of a state. The tragedy of tripolarity now requires new visions and strategies beyond human-drawn borders.

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