

NOTE

FROM THE HIMALAYAS TO THE BAY

A Correspondent writes :

Even as the Copenhagen summit was in progress in December 2009 a stunning example of the killing and devastating effects global warming and climate change is already having on humanity, came out in a story from the *UK Guardian* newspaper. Reporters for the paper wrote a story about a 1,000 mile journey they had undertaken—from the Himalayan mountains in Nepal to the Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh where the rivers that start in the Himalayas empty out. These reporters wanted to observe and witness the actual impact of global warming on the people and ecosystems in this region.

Their journey started in the high Himalayas—the roof of the world, a world of snow-capped peaks and awe-inspiring glaciers. But they found something else—evidence of immense changes that are occurring. They saw the Thulagi glacier—with a melted lake that has doubled in size in a few years and is held back by only a low wall of dead ice and earth. If the glacier continues to melt as it has, billions of gallons of water will burst through this dam and devastate villages and farmland below. Thulagi is just one of 20 growing glacial lakes in Nepal. Average temperatures in Nepal have risen 1.6 degrees C in 50 years. But high in the mountains of Nepal, temperatures have risen 4 degrees C and are expected to increase 8 degrees C by 2050 at the current rate.

The story says the people of the area feel as if they are "living under a death sentence." A local official in one town in the Everest valley region says, "They say they are not sure there will be a tomorrow... the snow used to come up to your waist in winter. Now children do not know what snow is. We have more flies and mosquitoes, more skin diseases. Communities are adapting by switching crops, but diseases are moving up the mountains."

Farther down from the mountains people are not able to plant their crops because the winter snows are not heavy—they have always relied on snow and glacier melt to water their fields. As the journey continues into other regions of Nepal, rainfall is becoming more unpredictable and erratic. In some areas there is drought, in others, torrential monsoon rains. Nepal's largest river, the Kosi, flooded hundreds of square kilometres of farmland, killing 1,500 people and displacing 3 million people in Nepal and India. When the water receded, people's farmlands were buried in 6 feet of sand, making it impossible to grow anything.

Further along this journey in India, it is drought which has been growing worse and worse. In the poor state of Bihar, only about 22 percent of the usual rainfall has come. As a result, 63 million people are expected to go hungry next year. The droughts used to happen every 4-5 years, but now things are much more erratic—rainfall is unpredictable and sometimes heavy and very destructive, while some of the flood-prone areas are facing drought. In cities in India such as Kolkata, temperatures have risen significantly and there are more cases of disease such as dengue fever and malaria.

When the journey concluded in the Bay of Bengal, dual problems were encountered. A sea-level rise is eating away at people's villages in some areas and

more powerful and frequent cyclones are also inundating islands and coastal villages with storm surges. Bangladesh will lose 20 percent of its land to sea level rise in the next 80 years if global warming is not reversed, the possibility of which seems remote because of successive failures of all those climate summits.

Think of all of this—of the effects on this entire region where 1 out of 4 people in the world live—all of them dependent on the Himalayas for water to drink, for irrigating croplands, for sanitation. What will it mean for decades more of global warming, melting off these glaciers until they are no more? Eliminating the natural beauty of these structures but even more devastating and destroying the lives where one-quarter of humanity live. □□□