

Climate change and its possible security implications

With General Assembly resolution 63/126, the impact of climate change and its possible security implications for the future have been placed on the agenda of the General Assembly. Its adoption by consensus shows that the relationship between climate change and security has begun to command serious attention among the international community. In the following, attention will be given to the significant implications of the resolution as called for in the resolution.

While the comprehensive application of the term 'security' in the resolution text may have facilitated its wide acceptance, it is a legitimate question whether a more narrowly defined use of the concept would help focus the responses of States to the risks that the international community may be able to achieve. As the Commission on International Law has noted, the concept of security in relation to climate change may risk the untaxing of the delicate balance of interests that sustain the resolution in its current form.

As has been well documented, the impacts of climate change are not geographically uniform and affect the various regions of the world differently. The same applies to the link between climate change and security, in its own conventional dimension, human, economic and ecological.

For the Arctic region, the impacts of climate change were set out in detail in the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) of 2004. A link between climate change and security in the Arctic region was also provided in the Arctic Human Development Report of the same year.

The changes observed in the Arctic provide a clear indication of the serious and social significance of global warming. They include the widespread melting of sea ice, as well as rising permafrost. In the near future, there could be serious implications for human health and food security, especially for indigenous peoples. Coastal erosion could threaten many communities and industrial facilities. It has been noted that it could become available to Arctic States, there could be easier access to other resources and new shipping routes along the North-eastern seaboard.

In the area around Iceland, particular attention is being paid to the interaction between changes in the climate and the marine ecosystem. Changes in the abundance of various fish stocks respond to changes in ocean temperature, chemical pollution, oxygen levels and increased influx of freshwater and sea ice as a result of increased melting and the melting of sea ice and glaciers. Therefore, regional changes in climate patterns could affect the range and recruitment of commercially important fish stocks, which is a serious concern for the economic security of a people overwhelmingly dependent on the living resources of the ocean.

Although many regions in the world are confronted with similar or more serious problems, the issue of climate change and security is of particular urgency with respect to many developing countries, including small island developing states (SIDS). Many of these states face a significant loss of territory and arable land due to sea-level rise, threatening not only their livelihood but also their survival. Therefore, Iceland remains fully supportive of the efforts of the states concerned to attract the attention of the international community to their cause.

Effective measures to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change must be seen as essential components of a strategy to contain modern threats to the human, economic, ecological, security of all United Nations member states. In this connection, it will be particularly important to ensure the success of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen in December. Other relevant United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development and United Nations specialized agencies and programs can also contribute to the process.

In certain instances, climate change may also give rise to security threats in the conventional sense. The Security Council should remain alert to regions that may face fragility, such as migration, the competition for land or access to other natural resources. Also, the United Nations, including the General Assembly, Fund and the Secretary-General, should be prepared to provide humanitarian assistance in case climate change-related security threats arise.

For resolution 63/201 to be implemented, the different parts of the United Nations system will need to work together in a coordinated and transparent fashion, making full use of the existing institutions and mandates.