

Opinion

How the elite add to the climate mess

Thousands or perhaps tens of thousands may have lost their lives because of scorching beams of sun

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People rally to end fossil fuels ahead of the 78th United Nations General Assembly and Climate Ambition Summit in New York on September 17, 2023. — AFP

Sweltering heat and unbearable temperatures in several parts of the world have once again forced millions of environmentalists to pressure policymakers into coming up with agendas that might address this much-ignored issue, which is threatening the very existence of humans.

Thousands or perhaps tens of thousands of people may have lost their lives because of the scorching beams of the sun that have been raining down on hapless people across the globe, wreaking havoc with the lives of people besides destroying their livelihoods.

But indifferent to this game of death and destruction is the global elite, who is not ready to make efforts to address this existential issue. Instead of taking this issue seriously, the rich are bent on coming up with policies that could add to environmental degradation. For instance, global arms merchants seem to have a strong desire to plunge country after country into the quagmire of conflicts.

Western weapons manufacturing companies and warmongers sitting on the boards of Western think tanks are trying to fuel tensions in the Middle East, the South China Sea, and Europe by advocating the opening of more war fronts.

It may be mentioned that a report from the UN on the environmental impacts of the Gaza war reveals that the conflict has created unprecedented soil, water and air pollution in the region, destroying sanitation systems and leaving tons of debris from explosive devices. According to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the war swiftly reversed limited progress in improving the region's water desalination and wastewater treatment facilities, restoring the Wadi Gaza Coastal Wetland, and investments in solar power installations.

The report says that explosive weapons have generated some 39 million tons of debris. Each square metre of the Gaza Strip is now littered with more than 107 kilograms (236 lbs) of debris. That is more than five times the debris generated during the battle for Mosul, Iraq, in 2017.

Scientists estimate that more than 281,000 tons of carbon dioxide were generated by Israel's aerial bombardment and ground invasion of Gaza in the first two months of the war, which is "greater than the annual carbon footprint of more than 20 of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations".

But despite these terrible consequences, no sincere effort is being made to douse the flames of the war. On the contrary, machinations are being hatched to broaden the scope of the conflict that would possibly engulf Lebanon and other countries in the region. However, such an escalation will further damage the environment of the region that has already been dealt a severe blow because of the Gaza conflict.

It is not only the Gaza conflict that is causing immense damage to the environment, but the war in Ukraine has also turned out to be catastrophic, triggering speculations about a possible ecocide that would have long-lasting impacts not only in Russia and Ukraine but also in the entire region.

According to the European Parliament, "Russia's war has caused massive air, water, land and soil pollution, as well as significant damage to ecosystems, with the risk of spillover into neighbouring countries. Estimates based on Ukraine's environmental

inspections show that Russia's invasion has inflicted roughly 52.4 billion euros in environmental damage."

Amidst this destruction in these two regions and elsewhere in the world, Western arms manufacturers are thriving, with their shares on stock exchanges skyrocketing. Weapons production in France, the US, the UK, Russia and other major suppliers has witnessed a phenomenal surge.

The two conflicts have created a sense of insecurity, prompting states to buy more and more weapons besides forcing them to increase their military budget. According to the Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute, the global military budget was a whopping \$2,443 billion in 2023, which witnessed a 6.8 per cent increase.

The think tank believes it was the steepest year-on-year rise since 2009 and pushed global spending to the highest level SIPRI has ever recorded. "The world military burden – defined as military spending as a percentage of global gross domestic product (GDP) – increased to 2.3 per cent in 2023. Average military expenditure as a share of government expenditure rose by 0.4 percentage points to 6.9 per cent in 2023 and world military spending per person was the highest since 1990, at \$306."

The world needs over 50 billion euros to mitigate the impacts of the damage caused to the ozone layer by environmental degradation. Global leaders are not ready to be generous enough to collect this amount, but they are lavishly spending on the militaries, defence, weapons, and nuclear technologies that are responsible for 4.0 per cent of the global carbon emission. Global elites that are part of this arms manufacturing and oil-producing lobbies are not ready to make any sacrifices for the sake of the environment.

Meat consumption is another factor contributing to global warming. Cows and other animal forms, as well as meat production and consumption, are believed to contribute 14 per cent of carbon emissions. Global demand for meat is growing – over the past 50 years, meat production has more than tripled. The world now produces more than 350 million tonnes each year.

Rich countries or regions consume more meat than poor states or regions. For instance, the per capita consumption of meat was highest in North America, at roughly 78.6 kilos per person in the period between 2020 and 2022. By comparison, the average person living in Africa consumed about 9.6 kilos per year during that period. Within rich countries, it is the middle, upper middle, rich and elite classes that tend to consume on average more meat than the poorer sections of society.

Vehicles are also one of the biggest sources of environmental pollution. The growth-driven economy does not want to put a full stop to the production of these vehicles that are agents of environmental destruction. There are about 1.475 billion vehicles on Earth now. About 19 per cent of those vehicles are in the US.

A report from Greenpeace Southeast Asia and the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), estimated global economic losses from fossil fuel air pollution at GBP2.2 trillion each year, or approximately 3.3 per cent of the global GDP. In the US alone, air pollution from burning fossil fuels is linked to an estimated 230,000 deaths and GBP450 billion in economic losses annually.

Despite these alarming figures, fossil fuels still supply around 80 per cent of the world's energy. Fossil fuel companies continue to produce and sell fossil fuel products, even as scientists advocate for a mass switch to renewable energy.

It is estimated that fossil fuels contributed to 78 per cent of the increase in total greenhouse gas emissions from 1970 to 2010. Air pollution from fossil fuels was responsible for about one in five deaths worldwide in 2018. Oil spills and coal mining contaminate water bodies, harming aquatic life and human health.

Fossil fuel extraction and climate change can lead to habitat loss, biodiversity decline, and species extinction. Fossil fuels are the most significant contributor to global climate change, accounting for over 75 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90 per cent of all carbon dioxide emissions.

But oil companies continue to run a malicious campaign against environmentalists, encouraging those who deny the very phenomenon of climate change. Such companies were also sued for causing damage to the environment, but litigation did not stop them from influencing public opinion. It is also claimed that a number of big oil companies knew the disastrous impacts of oil drilling, extraction and consumption on the environment, but they did not heed their internal reports on this issue.