



Figure 1 Desert locusts invade Taiboto in Garbatulla, Isiolo County, on January 12, 2020. Heavy rainfall and warmer temperatures are favourable conditions for locust breeding. PHOTO | FILE | TONY KARUMBA/AFP via Getty Images)

CLIMATE CHANGE IS FEEDING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE HORN

PETER KAGWANJA

Climate change is “sharpening disputes” over the already scarce resources, providing the lightning rod that terrorists, armed groups and the elite exploit; to ignite and sustain wars in societies facing economic uncertainties. The Locust invasion is perhaps the most recent addition to the whims of climbing temperatures seen as a threat to global security and blamed for increasing incidence of armed conflict and violent extremism in the Horn of Africa.

Humor in Kenya’s social media space is drawing on the least expected issues: the deadly link between climate change and conflict. “It took Locusts for President Uhuru Kenyatta to sack Mwangi Kiunjuri”, goes one tweet, commenting on the sacking of Kenya’s Minister for Agriculture during the January 14, 2020 cabinet reshuffle.

“Never underestimate the power of nature and small people working together”, it adds.

Spurious as the tweet might appear, it dovetails into the global debate on the nexus between climate change—including above average temperature, excessive or insufficient rainfall, desertification and environmental

degradation—and conflict in the world's most vulnerable countries.

Locust invasion, the worst outbreak of locusts in some places in 70 years, is the most recent addition to the vagaries of climbing temperatures seen as a threat to global security and blamed for increasing incidence of armed conflict and violent extremism in the Horn of Africa.

The locust threat has been blamed on rapidly warming waters in the Indian Ocean off the Eastern African coast which also spawned an unusual number of strong tropical cyclones off Africa, precipitated heavy rains in East Africa, making 2019 the region's wettest year on record. Heavy rainfall and warmer temperatures are favorable conditions for locust breeding.

In its wake, the locust invasion poses an unprecedented threat to food security, and has the potential of heightening social tensions, conflict and violent extremism in this vulnerable region.

According to IGAD, a regional body initially formed in 1986 as a regional response to twin threat of drought and locusts: "A typical desert locust swarm can contain up to 150 million locusts per square kilometer". But what particularly makes locusts a real menace is that swarms soared by the wind can cover 62 to 93 miles in a day, and can destroy as much food crops in a day as is sufficient to feed 2,500 people.

The locust menace is giving new impetus to the debate on the link between climate change and the increased incidence of war, and the resurgence of violent extremism in the Horn of Africa.

Scholarship and policy debates on the link between climate change and armed conflict are hinged on the concept of "climate security", itself based on the idea that climate-related change amplifies existing risks in society that endangers the security of humans, ecosystems, economy, infrastructure and societies.

One influential research paper titled Warming increases the risk of civil war in Africa (November 23, 2009), tabled in the Proceedings of the United States National Academy of Sciences, suggested a strong link between temperature rises in Africa and significant increases in the likelihood of war.

The paper points out that as global temperatures climb, the risk of armed conflict is expected to increase substantially. The likelihood of war has increased significantly during warmer years, with rising temperatures influencing between 3% and 20% of armed conflict risk over the last century.

In the Horn of Africa, there is are strong historical linkages between temperature climb on the one hand and civil war and violent extremism on the other.

Ominously, future temperature trends indicate that armed conflict incidence will increase roughly by 54% as of 2030, which translates to an additional 393,000 battle deaths (if future wars are as deadly as recent ones).

But climate change in itself is not a cause of violent conflict. Climate change is not a cause of violent conflict. It simply "sharpen disputes" over the already scarce resources.

Warlords, cattle rustlers and violent extremists are not driven by rain, the temperature, or the sea level. Instead, they have opportunistically exploited draught, flooding, starvation, agricultural or natural disasters in their strategies of fighting for power, territory, money or revenge.

Climate change merely provides the lightning-rod that terrorists, armed groups and elite exploit to ignite and sustain wars in societies facing economic uncertainties resulting from temperature-related worsening livelihood conditions and yield declines in economies heavily dependent upon rain-fed agriculture.

Despite hypes about Africa rising, the continent is still heavily dependent for its primary source of

livelihood on timely and adequate rainfall, good temperatures and winds.

In Somalia, the epicenter of violent extremism in the Horn, 70 percent of the population depends on regular climate to make a living.

Here, the al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Shabaab militants and other violent groups have exploited a mix of droughts, floods and increased desertification caused by climate change within the wider canvas of an upsurge of tensions between herders, farmers, and clans in recent decades to radicalize and recruit fighters in their terror campaign. Climate change-related threats such as drought, floods and displacements enable the political narratives of insurgent groups to gain support.

Terrorist groups have destroyed the environment through deforestation to sell timber and charcoal and illegal poaching to fund their wars. It is estimated that Al-Shabaab smuggles about three million bags of charcoal from southern Somalia at an estimated revenue of \$360–\$384 million per year. In Kenya's Boni forest, Al-Shabaab fighters have been involved in hunting of buffalo, zebra, antelope, giraffe and other animals for meat. They have displaced local pastoralists who use the forest as a source of pasture for their livestock, harvest honey and wild fruits, therefore affective livelihood.

Terrorists are involved in trade in wildlife products, the fourth largest illegal business globally with an annual turnover of between \$7 and \$23 billion. Over 100 elephants are being killed every day for meat and ivory, with the population of elephant by 62% between 2010 and 2012.

There is a direct connection between climate change-related risk and the ensuing humanitarian crisis and the resurgence of al-Shabaab in the Horn over the 2017-2019 period. In 2011, reduced rainfall as a result of sea-surface temperatures changes in the Indian and Pacific oceans led to severe droughts, the severest drought in 60

years, that displaced millions across the region. In Somalia and Ethiopia, it is estimated that drought has triggered 1.1 million and 500,000 new displacements respectively since 2017. In 2018, droughts and floods displaced almost 1.5 million people in the region. Al-Shabaab has radicalized and recruited victims of floods, droughts and displacement to its campaign.

From a policy solutions perspective, the assumed link climate change and war feeding into the new geopolitics of the post-Cold War era characterized by the growing tensions between the America-led West, resurgent Russia and emerging powers in the global South, particularly China.

The climate change-war nexus is inspiring a new interventionist debate. In the US, climate change is increasingly being talked about as a threat to US national security.

In the popular media, food shortages, water crises and catastrophic flooding in vulnerable regions such as the Horn are now invoked to justify "an American humanitarian relief or military response". Military strategists in the Pentagon have advanced the idea of climate wars. In this context, since 2016, a mix of "climate war" and "war on China" has effectively eclipsed the "war on violent extremism", accounting for the intense militarization of the Horn region and Africa's Red Sea Coast.

African countries and their partners need to invest in more collaborative research to fully understand the relationship between climate change and conflict. A world that has full advance knowledge of the trends in temperature changes has much more time to anticipate future conflicts and step up preventive diplomacy and strategies for good governance to deal with both war and climate change.

Professor Peter Kagwanja is former Government Adviser and currently the Chief Executive of Africa Policy Institute.

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NHIF Parking Tower 5th Floor, Ragati Road
P. O. Box 34791 - 00100, Nairobi, Kenya*