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Man-made and natural disasters — major causes of forced migration within and beyond the borders of Tajikistan

The level of the man-made impact on the environment is indicative of the modern state of human society, since environmental deterioration causes food production to fall, living conditions and standards of living to deteriorate and the population's security to become vulnerable, and, ultimately, leads to their forced migration.

In Tajikistan, these problems are due both to natural factors (for example, floods following the intensive thawing of glaciers and snow, earthquakes or landslides) and to human factors as a result of improper farming practices (deforestation, erosion and salinization of soil, water-logging of soil, and the pollution of soil and open water bodies), all of which, in turn, make the environment unsuitable for life or lead to disastrous consequences.

Tajikistan is a country noted for its diversity of Eurasian ecosystems and possesses vast water resources. Some 55.4 per cent of Central Asia's water resources are formed on the Republic's territory. The formation of such a streamflow volume has an enormous impact on the adjacent territories. Active channelling processes are accompanied by floods, mudslides, water-induced erosion, landslides and other active geological phenomena. More than 32 per cent of the country's territory is subject to extreme flooding.

Over the last 50 years, the Republic's population has more than quadrupled in size. This demographic increase has naturally led to the settlement and development of new territories, resulting in greater use of natural resources. Intensive cattle grazing in mountain ecosystems and a shortage of energy resources during the winter months have led to a disastrous reduction in biological diversity and deforestation in certain parts of the country. Owing to a shortage of land, people cultivate hillsides with gradients of 15 to 25^{o} or more. All this in turn has greatly worsened erosion, disrupting the water balance, leading to a deterioration in the quality of water and land resources and reducing crop yields; these problems have consequently become the main causes of environmental migration.

As I have already mentioned, owing to a shortage of fuel trees and bushes are constantly being cut down, something which in turn has a negative effect on biodiversity and intensifies the process of desertification. The disruption of the ecosystem is leading to forced internal migration. For example, intensive deforestation involving the dwarf shrub Eurotia (Ceratoides) in the Murgab region of Tajikistan may have serious consequences both for biodiversity, inter alia for endangered species, and for the local population who are forced to move as a result of the deteriorating environmental situation.

Another problem is water-logging of soil and the unacceptably high level of groundwater, especially in the Sogdi and Khatlon regions. As a result of rising groundwater, crop yields are falling off dramatically, land and houses are becoming unusable and, ultimately, this means that people have to leave their homes. Hundreds of farms in Tajikistan are constantly or periodically under water.

The Government is taking both legislative and practical measures to solve the problems of environmental migration. Matters concerning environmental migration in Tajikistan are governed by the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Migration, the Presidential Decree on combating illegal migration in the Republic of Tajikistan more effectively, Governmental Decree No. 344 (of 4 September 1999) on the provision of credit to farms in environmentally vulnerable areas and their relocation from these hazardous regions during the period 2000 to 2004, and Governmental Decree No. 467 (of 9 September 2000) on approval of provisions for the relocation of farms from environmentally hazardous territories of the Republic of Tajikistan, as well as by directives issued by the Tajik Ministry of Labour and Employment.

In accordance with a plan approved by the Government, 7,664 families were to be relocated from environmentally hazardous regions during the period 2000 to 2004. For various reasons, financial, organizational or otherwise, only 2,468 families (33.2 per cent) were actually relocated. During these years, a further 2,000 families, more or less, joined the ranks of those who had to move for environmental reasons.

Frequently, the measures taken to solve the problems of environmental migration are aimed at dealing with the aftermath of natural disasters or at increasing the technical capabilities of the relevant departments.

The solution of a number of other problems by preventive measures may directly help to improve the situation in this area. The main issues here are:

1. Integration of environmental policy into economic and social plans and programmes;

2. Creation of a modern database and network on matters relating to environmental migration and territories where environmental threats to the population seem likely;

3. Improvement of the potential and analytical skills of the staff of various institutions and departments in handling environmental management and migration issues;

4. Introduction of environmental assessment mechanisms and of guarantees that they will be applied in planning any agricultural activity that may affect the environment;

5. Public awareness-raising campaigns, measures to ensure access to information on various environmental matters and the population's involvement in communal environmental management methods.

Efforts to curb environmental migration are directly dependent on sustainable methods for managing natural resources. Greater attention ought to be paid to supporting and implementing preventive measures to reduce the risk of environmental deterioration. In particular, this might be achieved by conducting campaigns and educational programmes to raise public awareness of environmental issues, by promoting and using other (alternative) forms of agriculture that do not harm the environment, teaching farmers simple agricultural methods that can prevent soil erosion and the pollution of water resources, and reinforcing hillsides by planting trees and other soil-stabilizing plants. This is also one of the basic priorities of the Millennium Development Goals to ensure environmental sustainability, and it could directly influence the solution of environmental migration issues.

Over the last two years, thanks to the assistance of international organizations, in particular the OSCE, work to prevent any worsening of the environmental situation in our country and, consequently, environmental migration has had precisely this focus. For example, OSCE projects during 2004 and 2005 were aimed at raising the population's environmental awareness in the Rasht valley and reinforcing eroded hillsides by planting trees. These projects were so successful that the local population was fully involved in their implementation; they have planted more than 300,000 saplings and planting continues.

To follow up this success, experts from the State Committee for Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Tajikistan have devised a project for the reforestation of environmentally impoverished territories. Under this project, territories in 17 regions of the Republic were selected and for the period 2005 to 2009 we have set ourselves the task as a matter of priority of carrying out reforestation work in an area comprising some 2,200 hectares. We consider this a very important project for guaranteeing the population's security and ensuring the environmental sustainability of their homes. The project is also attractive because the planted trees:

— can serve as a reliable means of stabilizing soil on hillsides where there are risks of landslides;

— accumulate moisture that helps to regulate the water balance and also provides an opportunity for growing other plants between the trees, thus helping to solve the problem of food security;

— can serve as a durable barrier in the path of mudflows on hillsides (this is especially important in Tajikistan where normal monthly precipitation can sometimes be concentrated in a very short period);

— protect the soil against wind and water erosion;

— provide a partial solution to energy deficit problems. The population can use some of the trees that are cultivated as firewood;

— reduce the risk of natural disasters and generally improve the environmental situation and associated forced migration;

— guarantee the population's employment and security;

— help to meet Tajikistan's commitments under global conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol.

We ask the OSCE and potential donor countries to consider the possibility of co-operation with us in this project.

Thank you for your attention.