

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

www.BlackCommentator.com

June 28, 2012 - Issue 478

While Africa Dries Up, the "First World" Grabs Land and Water Solidarity America By John Funicello BC Columnist

"...We are in serious ecological overshoot, consuming resources faster than the Earth can replace them...The consequences of this are predictable and dire."

-World Wildlife Fund International's Director General James Leape, at the release of the WWF's Living Planet Report of 2006.

Six years ago, the World Wildlife Fund was predicting the problems we would have in sustaining life on the planet. A quarter-century ago, the World Watch Institute was warning about the same things, as it has done ever since.

What we are facing with climate change and the related serious problems of the planet, which threatens most life on the planet, was entirely predictable. In fact, it was predicted and with painful accuracy.

It is no wonder that countries of the so-called First World (those highly technological or just very rich, like Saudi Arabia) have been spreading out over the world, looking for places where they can get the natural resources that are needed to support the rather extravagant life style they have developed (keeping in mind, of course, that not all the people have ever had access to all those wonders).

Right now, it is important to ignore the opinions of those who keep telling the American people that they need not worry. Every one of

them has the key to continued "prosperity," if we just let them run with their ideas. The current presidential campaign is a case in point.

Neither of the main party candidates has the spine to stand up before the people and tell them that the good times are over, that there is not enough material out there in the world to support their habits. No one is willing to stand up and tell the people that there are no other oceans out there to find fish in; there is no other atmosphere that is devoid of lung-killing elements; there is no hidden supply of freshwater lakes that have pristine water for drinking; and there is no more land, fertile and clean, on which to raise our food.

What there is out there is all there is, no matter how you look at it or try to explain it. Every day, politicians run away from the problems that James Leape described as "predictable and dire." And, he did it six years ago. Lester Brown has been warning about it, even before he founded the Worldwatch Institute in 1974.

At that time, no one was listening. Today, a great percentage of the people not only are not listening, they are denying that there are dire consequences to doing nothing. A large part of the responsibility for "doing something," of course, rests with the so-called developed world, since it takes up the greatest percentage of the world's resources.

Occasionally, the popular press features a story (or, even a series) on water, but rarely does any reporter or writer focus on the casual use of a limited supply of clean, potable water and what it will mean when it begins to run out, so that even the least interested members of the community notice it. The flooding this week of Gulf Coast communities presents a problem for the mind to absorb. There are places in Florida, for instance, where more than 13 inches of rain fell, according to *Bloomberg News*, but some press reports said that as much as 20 inches fell in some places in a two-day period. That's a lot of water for a region that was drying up fast, that is, until this week. But that water is not the kind you can catch and save and use sometime in the future. Rather, the bulk of it is simply destructive and, when it is gone, people pick up the pieces of their lives and go forward.

In so many places in the world, people use fossil water. That's water that was deposited under the earth thousands or millions of years ago in aquifers of unimaginable size. Problem is, that water is not replaced by rains or glaciers. It is used up and, when it's gone, it's gone. Saudi Arabia, which was once a food exporter using its fossil water, is now looking to grow its food in other countries, especially in the (relatively)

nearby Horn of Africa. It is thought that the country experienced "peak water" about 10 years ago.

Countries, transnational corporations, and just plain rich people are searching the globe, trying to find a place they can grow food and make money...lots of it. Everybody eats and everybody needs drinking water, so cornering the market in food production and acquiring ownership of as much water as possible virtually guarantees that people will be knocking at your door.

GRAIN, a small international non-profit that fights on behalf of small farmers, community-controlled and biodiversity-based food production, sustainable methods, and the maintenance of traditional methods of living, said this month that the land grabs of the rich are really about seizing the water, and that is what is happening in various parts of Africa and on other continents.

In a GRAIN report this month, it was noted: "One new plantation in Gambela (Ethiopia), owned by Saudi-based billionaire Mohammed al-Amoudi, is irrigated with water diverted from the Alwero River. Thousands of people depend on Alwero's water for their survival and Al-Amoudi's industrial irrigation plans could undermine their access to it. In April 2012, tensions over the project spilled over, when an armed group ambushed Al-Amoudi's Saudi Star Development Company operations, leaving five people dead.

"The tensions in south western Ethiopia illustrate the central importance of access to water in the global land rush. Hidden behind the current scramble for land is a world-wide struggle for control over water. Those who have been buying up vast stretches of farmland in recent years, whether they are based in Addis Ababa, Dubai or London, understand that the access to water they gain, often included for free and without restriction, may well be worth more over the long-term, than the land deals themselves."

Although Al-Amoudi was born in Ethiopia, he has been a Saudi citizen since he was 19. A construction and real estate magnate and one of the richest men in the world, he has investments in several countries and is said to be in the process of investing US\$3 billion in Ethiopian projects. Presumably, that includes gaining control over more land and water.

Corporations from India, Europe, and other countries, including the U.S., are moving in on the massive land grabs that involve millions of hectares (a hectare is 2.47 acres) in various countries of Africa. And, as GRAIN maintains, they are all after not just the control of the land but, more importantly, of the water. All of this is necessary because of the profligate and unsustainable use of water for irrigation of crops in the home country.

Continuous cropping and the monoculture of America's own Midwest is an example of what is a part of the same problem: endless mile upon mile of corn, soybeans, and wheat, with much of it genetically engineered without any idea of the effects of those crops on people who eat the foodstuffs that result from such engineering. In California, the seemingly endless fields, groves, and orchards of fruit and row crops are using the water at a rate that is 15 percent more than can be replenished by rain and snow melt. And, that's not to mention the serious depletion of the water from rivers like the Colorado, which has not reached the sea in any meaningful way for decades.

The "real value" is in the water and the water is abundant in Africa, said Neil Crowder of the Britain-based Chayton Capital, which has been acquiring farmland in Zambia, according to GRAIN, which points out that such investors perceive Africa's water resources as being "vastly underutilized" and ready to be harnessed for food production for export.

The reality, GRAIN notes, is that "a third of Africans already live in water-scarce environments and climate change is likely to increase these numbers significantly. Massive land deals could rob millions of people of their access to water and risk the depletion of the continent's most precious fresh water sources."

What is being described in reports from many countries is nothing less than a return to colonialism, which may not be in exactly the same form of the old colonialism, politically or economically, but has essentially the same result. A small elite that cuts deals with transnational corporations will be the ones (along with their minions) who benefit from the leases or outright purchases of the land and water, while the people lose their traditions, culture, and their lives because they no longer have control over their lands, which sustain them. And, since political entities (foreign governments) keep a safe distance, their fingerprints are not on the transactions. So, it could not really be colonialism, right?

No one should have any illusions about what is happening to the "developing" countries where the rich roll into villages in their four-wheel-drive monstrosities, directly from the airport, and tell the villagers that they are about to receive the gift of "development," so that they can live like the "First World." After the message is delivered, the rich are driven back to the airport, back to their real world, while the villagers, happy to have the attention of so many important people, are left to wonder what the "development" is all about. This is especially true, when they have to start paying for water and start paying for rent on a small piece of land on which to grow their food.

And, to make up the difference between subsistence and starvation, they will be allowed to apply for jobs on the vast plantations that will be created to raise food to be shipped to Europe, Saudi Arabia, China, Japan, or the U.S. What is being played out across the planet today is what has been played out in microcosm in the U.S., in that the nation has shifted to an industrial system of food production that requires fertile land, lots of petroleum products and chemicals, cheap water, and, above all, cheap labor. The U.S. has run out of most of the above ingredients and food is becoming more and more expensive. Naturally, the handful of giant food companies that controls food production are looking for other places to ply their trade and this is true of the other developed countries.

Ordinary people in the countries targeted for exploitation do not deserve the treatment to which they are, or will be, subjected. They have gone from being under the power of colonial rulers to, in mid-20th Century, being subjects of despots or strongman rulers, whose allegiance was to those who could do them favors, not to the people. The people deserve better and it is up to the citizens of the "advanced democracies" to see that they get it.

The world's corporations, especially Corporate America, that are engaged in the new colonialism will never see to the peoples' freedom or needs on their own. They will have to be forced to do the right thing.

BlackCommentator.com Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.



Copyright © 2002-2012
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved