

Water crisis in Andes is challenge for U.S. security establishment, Peru

January 18 2011, By Wendy Leopold

The Medill School of Journalism graduate student team yesterday released its latest story in its series on the national security implications of climate change. Heather Somerville of Medill National Security Reporting Project reports from the Andes in Peru, where mountain glaciers are rapidly melting. Facing a dramatic shortage in the country's water supply, Peru has turned to Washington for help.

Meanwhile, U.S. officials worry [Peru](#) could quickly become a case study in how climate change could destabilize a strategically important region, and emerge as a national security threat to Americans thousands of miles away.

Among the story's findings:

- Entire glaciers are expected to disappear in 10 years, quicker than many scientists predicted.
- Glacier melt in Peru has already caused water shortages, leading to conflict, displacing communities and threatening agriculture.
- The U.S. is unprepared to address climate change in South America within five years – the window of opportunity Peru has before glacier melt becomes a security crisis.
- Peru's water crisis will test how the U.S. will deal with climate change using diplomacy and foreign aid in allied nations.

The story ran yesterday in *The Washington Post* as the newest installment in Global Warning, a three-month investigation by a team of

Northwestern University student reporters that unveils the inadequacies in the nation's security establishment in preparing for many of the environmental changes that are coming faster than predicted and that threaten to reshape demands made on the military and intelligence community. This is despite the fact that the Defense Department has called climate change a potential "accelerant of instability."

The Washington Post will link from the story to the entire project featured on the team's website, global-warning.org , which features stories, videos and sophisticated interactive graphics that have been distributed to more than 600 papers and countless websites across the country and internationally. The project was received with high praise from prominent journalists and national security experts.

The Global Warning project was launched on Jan. 10 with stories in The Washington Post, on the McClatchy Newspapers' Washington website and distributed by McClatchy to more than 600 newspapers. The project continues to be widely acclaimed by academics and professionals.

"Reporting from the Arctic Circle, Bangladesh, Peru, Washington D.C. and elsewhere, the Medill students deliver a well-reported and well-told examination of an issue that, while largely neglected by the government and the media, is fast becoming one of the most serious national security concerns," said Josh Meyer, who teaches in Medill's Washington Program. Meyer, the director for education and outreach of the Medill National Security Journalism Initiative, was a national security writer for the Los Angeles Times for 10 years.

The 10 Medill graduate students interviewed more than 200 current and former national security officials and experts and reviewed scores of official documents and reports. While reporting, they used social media to create a community of people interested in the intersection of national security and climate change, informing them of their work through

Tweets, blog posts and an e-newsletter.

Among the findings in Global Warning:

- The government lacks critical information about where and when climate changes will happen and what effect they will have on the U.S. military, intelligence and national security communities.
- In a major strategy review last year, the Pentagon acknowledged the challenge that climate change poses to its operations, including a dramatically increased need for intervention in future humanitarian crises. While military branches have begun global assessments of their vulnerabilities, many security experts say the work lacks senior level support in Congress and the administration and that military service preparations are not keeping up with environmental changes.
- Work by the CIA and environmental scientists during the Clinton administration was largely ignored in the years of George Bush's presidency. Although the CIA is now spearheading intelligence assessments to determine where climate change could affect global stability, that work may be in jeopardy as Republicans skeptical of climate control take control of key congressional committees.
- The nation's satellite system, which provides the lifeblood of climate information, is in disrepair after years of inadequate funding and, in the past two decades, the intelligence community has struggled both internally and politically to respond to the challenges posed by climate change.
- At home, critical infrastructure along the Gulf of Mexico is vulnerable to the stronger storms and more frequent flooding that are predicted due to climate change.

Stories in the series also explore how the U.S. defense and intelligence community is preparing for a melting Arctic, shifting disease vectors and rising seas in South Asia.

In addition to traditional print and online pieces, the project allows audiences to explore the impact of climate change through creative interactive graphics that:

- demonstrate the impact of rising seas on domestic military installations;
- visualize the cascade of consequences that could turn climate changes into national security threats and crises;
- cast users as decision makers in a war game that plays out the consequences of climate change in four regional scenarios;
- convey the interrelated history of scientific findings, extreme weather events and political and defense policy as they relate to a changing climate through an interactive timeline;
- let users hear from the experts themselves and engage in the conversation; and
- provide an online library of dozens of government, academic and think tank documents related to [climate change](#) and national security.

“The imaginative use of interactive technology highlights Medill students’ advanced skills in presenting in-depth reporting in creative and entertaining ways that engage people and keep them informed,” said Professor Ellen Shearer, co-director of the Medill National Security Journalism Initiative and director of the Medill Washington Program.

The students learned sophisticated interactive storytelling approaches with the help of Kat Downs of The Washington Post and Nelson Hsu of National Public Radio.

The Global Warning Project -- the first in a series of annual investigative reporting efforts -- was funded by the McCormick Foundation as part of Medill's broader [National Security](#) Journalism Initiative. Established in January 2009, that initiative provides journalists-in-training and working journalists the knowledge and skills necessary to report accurately and with context on issues related to defense, security and civil liberties.

Provided by Northwestern University

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