

War-torn South Sudan at grave risk on climate change

July 18 2017, by Sam Mednick



In this photo taken Thursday, June 29, 2017, a man stands by bags of charcoal at an impounded warehouse just outside of Juba, South Sudan. The world's youngest nation is well into its fourth year of civil war and as it is ravaged by fighting and hunger it also grapples with the devastating effects of climate change, which is exacerbated by the deforestation. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

"I'm addicted to cutting trees," says Taban Ceasor.

His stained hands sift through jagged pieces of [charcoal](#) in his busy shop

in South Sudan's capital. But the 29-year-old logger says the number of trees needed to fuel his trade is falling sharply as the country's forest cover disappears.

The world's youngest nation is well into its fourth year of civil war. As South Sudan is ravaged by fighting and hunger, it also grapples with the devastating effects of [climate](#) change. Officials say the conflict is partly to blame.

South Sudan's first-ever [climate change conference](#) in June highlighted a problem for much of sub-Saharan Africa: The impoverished nations face some of the world's harshest impacts from global warming and are the least equipped to fight back.

The United States' recent withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement hurts a huge potential source of assistance. The U.S. Embassy in South Sudan said it "does not currently support climate change efforts" in the country.

The United Nations says South Sudan is at grave risk at being left behind.

According to the Climate Change Vulnerability Index 2017 compiled by global risk consultancy Verisk Maplecroft, South Sudan is ranked among the world's five most vulnerable countries and is experiencing some of the most acute temperature changes.



In this photo taken Friday, July 14, 2017, a woman and her daughter walk home with firewood in the small town of Rajaf, near Juba, in South Sudan. The world's youngest nation is well into its fourth year of civil war and as it is ravaged by fighting and hunger it also grapples with the devastating effects of climate change, which is exacerbated by the deforestation. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

"It's rising 2.5 times quicker" than the global average, says Jean-Luc Stalon, senior deputy country director at the U.N. Development Program.

Both U.N. and government officials call it a partially man-made crisis. While up to 95 percent of South Sudan's population is dependent on "climate-sensitive activities for their livelihoods" such as agriculture and forestry, the civil war is worsening the problem.

The rate of deforestation in South Sudan is alarming and if it continues,

in 50 to 60 years there will be nothing left, says Arshad Khan, country manager for the U.N. Environment Program. The lack of trees is directly contributing to the rise in temperatures.

Tree-cutting is especially lucrative in South Sudan because there's no central power grid to supply electricity. A reported 11 million people use charcoal for cooking, or almost the entire population.

"This makes me more money than any other business," says Ceasor, the Juba vendor, who says he could barely survive before turning to tree-cutting.

Thirty-five percent of the country's land was once covered with trees, and only 11 percent is now, according to the ministry of environment and agriculture.



In this photo taken Thursday, July 13, 2017, scattered trees dot the once densely forested land, seen from an airplane, in South Sudan. The world's youngest

nation is well into its fourth year of civil war and as it is ravaged by fighting and hunger it also grapples with the devastating effects of climate change, which is exacerbated by the deforestation. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

"Desperate people are destroying the environment," says Lutana Musa, South Sudan's director for climate change.

Countries across Africa are struggling to cope with a warmer world. Although the continent produces less than 4 percent of the world's greenhouse gases, the UNDP says climate stresses and a limited capacity to adapt are increasing Africa's vulnerability to climate change.

In South Sudan, the deforestation is compounded by an increase in illegal exports of wood and charcoal by foreign companies.

"People are taking advantage of the insecurity," says Joseph Africano Bartel, South Sudan's deputy environment minister. He says that due to the conflict there's no supervision at the country's borders, even though South Sudan has banned the export of charcoal.

South Sudan is rich in mahogany and teak, both of which are in high demand especially in Arab nations, Bartel says. He says South Sudanese tree-cutters are hired by companies primarily from Sudan, Libya and Lebanon that smuggle the coal and wood out through neighboring Uganda.

In an abandoned charcoal warehouse in Juba, 50 tons of coal sits stacked in bags. Arabic writing scribbled on the front of each sack reads: "Made in South Sudan."



In this photo taken Thursday, June 29, 2017, Taban Ceasor sells bags of charcoal at his shop in Gudele Market, in Juba, South Sudan. The world's youngest nation is well into its fourth year of civil war and as it is ravaged by fighting and hunger it also grapples with the devastating effects of climate change, which is exacerbated by the deforestation. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

"I've seen bags that say 'Destination Dubai'," Charlie Oyul, a lead investigator with the environment ministry, told The Associated Press.

A few weeks ago, Oyul's team impounded the warehouse and arrested the company's owner and his assistant, who Oyul said were working for a Sudanese contractor. But Kamal Adam, a South Sudanese company official who is out on bail, says they sell charcoal only to locals.

The company is one of five illegal operations known to authorities in

Juba and the surrounding area, and it's the only one to be shut down. As much as South Sudan's authorities try to stem the illegal exports of charcoal and wood, Oyul says he can't keep up.

During a recent visit by The Associated Press to the impounded warehouse, roughly 10 trucks carrying piles of wood and charcoal were seen swiftly driving by.

At its climate change conference last month, South Sudan reaffirmed its commitment to the Paris climate agreement and criticized the U.S. withdrawal under President Donald Trump.

"Trump thinks climate change isn't a reality," says Lutana, South Sudan's climate change director. "He should know that his pulling out won't stop people from continuing to work on it."



In this photo taken Friday, July 14, 2017, a field that was once a densely populated forest lays bare near Rajaf, near Juba, In South Sudan. The world's youngest nation is well into its fourth year of civil war and as it is ravaged by fighting and hunger it also grapples with the devastating effects of climate change, which is exacerbated by the deforestation. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

Sitting alone at his empty desk in a dimly lit, run-down office at the environment ministry, Lutana says that although South Sudan has several proposed projects to fight climate change, he doesn't expect action any time soon as the [civil war](#) continues.

The UNEP is working with South Sudan's government to appeal for \$9 million to set up an early warning system for the weather and train government officials on [climate change](#). But donors are showing concern because of growing insecurity, and officials say the project won't move forward without peace.

"Because of our situation, the environment just isn't a priority," Lutana says.

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Citation: War-torn South Sudan at grave risk on climate change (2017, July 18) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-07-war-torn-south-sudan-grave-climate.html>

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