Environmental Challenges and Risks in North Africa

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Previous speakers have provided us with the theoretical framework for enlarging the concept of security to include environmental factors. Man has always been faced with natural phenomena that threaten his security and even his life. The phenomena may occur frequently or occasionally, they may last for a few seconds or for years, but nearly all of them strike without prior warning and their impact may continue to be felt for a long time. Survivors find themselves without assets and incapable of meeting their most basic needs. If the situation persists, it may lead to tension, conflicts and even violence.

However, there is no empirical evidence indicating that natural disasters and other environmental phenomena are by themselves strong determinants of violence. Rather, a number of conditions have been found to open the way to violence when they obtain during the stressful period that follows a disaster or an ecological problem. They may be political (corruption, the unlawful use of force), social (discrimination, injustice), demographic (high birth rates, uncontrolled urbanization), or ecological (scarcity of resources, spread of diseases). These factors may interfere with capabilities that individuals and communities may have developed to absorb shocks. It is known that societies have devised methods to deal with harsh conditions that are permanent features of their environment, as well as with emergencies. For example, communities living in the south of Tunisia where water and arable land are scarce, have developed sophisticated methods to allocate water (the system designed by Ibnu Shabbat in the 9th century in the oasis of Tozeur is still in use) and to use land for grazing and planting.

However, when rules are not observed, survival and resilience (i.e. the capacity to absorb shocks) may be threatened: individuals are no longer able to ensure their livelihood, whether in ordinary or emergency situations. This feeling of insecurity is likely to lead to tension and violence if:
–   The resources needed for survival are in a state of degradation and cannot be replaced by other resources;
–   The quantities of resources are insufficient to meet demand and/or access to the resources is unequal;
–   Groups attempt to gain control over diminishing resources, and to exclude others from access to those resources;
–   The disorderly exploitation of resources leads to their further degradation, thereby increasing tension and the probability of conflict.

But even when recurrent or exceptional environmental conditions do not lead to conflicts and violence, they could still represent a serious threat to human security, i.e. man's quest to live free from want and free from fear. Persons deprived of an income-generating activity, food, education, health, housing and other fundamental rights cannot live in security. Therefore, achieving environmental security and, through it, human security is not only a political necessity but also an ethical imperative.

The paper examines the environmental threats/risks that confront the North African countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, focussing on three interrelated risks: land degradation, desertification, and water scarcity. It further discusses political, economic and social variables that have created some of the existing environmental problems, or that failed to deal with them when they emerged. Finally, it will suggest measures that will prevent the present situation from becoming more severe, perhaps repair the damage that has been done, and ultimately ensure human security for the population through a more secure environment.