

Environmental Terrorism in the Arab Gulf (*)

In the list of active agencies and networks, women are absent. In fact, there is no literature or report to suggest the involvement of women in the ecological disaster of the Gulf, ironically, not in the making of the disaster nor in the repairs. For how long will women remain uninvolved? Aren't they as much a victim of the pollution?

The matter is strictly in the hands of international and local firms which are headed by men. Furthermore, the experts on the field are strictly men since women and men are segregated in the work place. Although the information which was gathered on the environmental conditions of the Gulf area exclude women, we feel they (women) are, nevertheless, interested in knowing what happened.

Saudi Arabia

It is the biggest oil slick in history and experts say the devastation it will cause to industry and wildlife will go unprecedented (1). The slick was estimated to be 11million barrels stretching in areas up to 60 miles (96km) long and 10 miles (16km) wide in the northern Arabian Sea. With a depth of six inches it moved like pack ice because of the debris it collected. Two additional smaller spills, one near the Saudi Arabian border town of Khafji and another near the Mina Al Bakr oil terminal off Iraq, brought the polluted area to approximately 85 miles long.

Birds are not the only unfortunate victims consumed by the huge swathe of oil. Fish, turtles, dolphins and an estimated population of 7,000 dugongs are in danger as well. About one million migratory birds flock to the western Arabian Gulf area yearly. Saudi Arabia is spreadheading the international efforts to handle the

disastrous spill. Agencies such as the Meteorological and Environmental Protection Agency (MEPA) have coordinated with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) secretaries and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), the US Coast Guard, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) among other environmentally concerned countries.

Kuwait

The gravest incident, yet, is the oil smoke from 500 well fires which hang in thick black pall over Kuwait City. By early March, the smoke formed a cloud around 600km long, blocking out the sunlight over an area of between 10,000 and 15,000 square meters (2). The temperature of the Earth's surface beneath the thick cloud was already 10 degrees Centigrade lower than normal. Experts predicted that after thirty days or so of burning, the area covered would be approximately four million square kilometers.

The side effects on humans and other life forms are toxic. Kuwaiti oil is rich in sulphur. Four million barrels a day burning for one year are

estimated to produce several million tons of sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere, which combined with the nitrogen oxides in the smoke, will produce millions of tons of acid rain. Fire fighters put out the fire in less than one year, thus, reducing the additional pollution and damage expected in the preliminary estimates.

The facts remain. The Kuwaitis complained of the thick smoke which put the City into darkness at noon. In addition to severe pollution, agriculture lands suffer from acid rain. The effects in lush fruit and grain producing regions, such as Asir in Saudi Arabia is disastrous. A research told *The Middle East* and we quote: "Every effort is being made to minimize the short term damage but that is the easy part, we can see what the short term damage is. For the long term-who knows, I don't believe anyone can be certain just what we are going to be up against in 10, 20, or 30 years."

The ecological disaster caused by the gulf war underlines the urgent need for international action to prevent attacks against the environment. Furthermore, the damage is bound to reach people across the continents directly, by affecting the climate and natural resources, and indirectly, from the imports of polluted goods and food products. Either way, women being the managers and consumers of these goods will be among the first to be touched •



(*) Excerpts from *The Middle East*, a regional magazine, March, April and August 1991 issues.

(1) Miriam Amic, "Environmental Terrorism", *The Middle East*, March 1991, p.13.

(2) Pat Lancaster, "Mosaic: Kuwait's Ecological Timebomb", *The Middle East*, April, 1991, p.44.