GRAPHIC DETAIL

Gas exchange: CO₂ emissions 1990–2006

Last week, the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency produced a preliminary report showing that China had overtaken the United States as the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels and the manufacture of cement (44% of the world's new cement is currently being laid in China).

Here's how the world's big emitters stacked up.

In per capita terms, the United States is still easily the most carbon-profligate economy, and it has made by far the largest historical contribution to the stock of atmospheric CO₂. In terms of the emissions it takes to provide a given amount of gross domestic product

(GDP), the carbon intensity, China is in the worst position. The carbon intensity has dropped in all four economies since 1990, most impressively in China. But given economic growth, overall global CO₂ emissions rose by more than 35% between 1990 and 2006.

Darfur's climate roots challenged

A United Nations (UN) report claiming that “climate change, land degradation and the resulting competition over scarce natural resources are among the root causes” of the Darfur conflict has been met with scepticism by experts on the region. Although these factors contributed, they say, the UN overstates the case.

The 358-page Sudan Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment, released on 22 June by the UN Environmental Programme, is in the main a comprehensive treatise on environmental management. “It seems to have been thoughtfully and professionally done,” says Martha Saavedra, associate director of the Center for African Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

But like many experts, Saavedra questions the UN's spin, which has played up the role of environmental degradation. Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, stressed this theme in a 16 June article in the *Washington Post* entitled “A Climate Culprit In Darfur”. His piece painted a tragic picture of resource scarcity triggering conflict between herders and settled farmers who had previously coexisted peacefully.

“Almost invariably, we discuss Darfur in a convenient military and political shorthand — an ethnic conflict pitting Arab militias against black rebels and farmers,” Ban wrote. “Look

to its roots, though, and you discover a more complex dynamic. Amid the diverse social and political causes, the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change.”

Alex de Waal, an expert on Darfur at the Social Science Research Council in New York, agrees that the dynamic is complex — and warns that the environmental argument, too, raises “a danger of oversimplifying Darfur.” Darfurians have adapted to environmental change for centuries, he points out. “Over the past thirty

Do Darfur's problems stem from resource scarcity?

years, change has occurred at a faster pace and on a larger scale,” he says. “But depleted natural resources and livelihood transformations cannot on their own account for armed conflict.”

The true culprit in Darfur is the National Islamic Front, which came to power in Khartoum in a military coup in 1989. It was bent on expanding its political base through ethnic cleansing, using terror as a tactic, says Eric Reeves, an analyst of Sudan at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. “This is not about competition over resources.”

“There will always be conflict, but having good, regular conflict regulating and resolution mechanisms — legitimate governing systems — is key,” agrees Saavedra, adding that although these issues are referred to in the report, the political issues that lie at the heart of the conflict are sidestepped.

A version of the Darfur conflict would have occurred whatever the environmental changes, says Reeves, adding that they cannot be used as an alibi for the international community's failure to prevent the genocide. “You don't have a diminishment in rain, and then an uncontrolled genocidal conflict; this just doesn't correspond to the political realities in Darfur.”

Declan Butler

M. KAMBER/REUTERS