

Climate disaster looms but Nepal oblivious to danger

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KATHMANDU, April 29: In northern Nepal, glaciers are receding. In the middle belt, forest fires are ravaging the hills and a withering drought has decimated farmlands. In the south, we've seen flash floods last year, and everything from fires to droughts this year. Have all these calamities been caused by global warming?

"Isn't it obvious?" exclaims climate change expert Ngamindra Dahal.

"Climate is changing. Let's learn to accept the fact; now our only role is to be prepared to deal with the changes that are further to come," says Dahal.

Climate experts call Nepal a "hot spot" because the average temperature rise that our country has seen is six times more than the global average. Reports show that the global temperature rise is 0.01 degrees, while the temperature rise in Nepal is 0.06. The temperature rise in the high Himalayas is still more (0.08).

For the layman, such increments may not seem too alarming, but as the calamities we've witnessed and are witnessing now prove, small changes can equal huge effects.

"The main effect of global warming for our region is going to be human displacement, either due to lack of water-as in droughts-or due to too much water-as in floods," says Dahal.

He shows a newspaper cutting with an exodus story of 300 families from Belghari, Sindhuli, who had to leave their homes forever because their wells dried up in April.

"There are countless other stories such as these from around our country that we don't know anything about," Dahal says.

Another event that stands out in his mind is the five-month-long drought of 2006 in Banke and Bardia, in southern Nepal, that eventually ended with heavy floods that swept away many villages.

In the north, things look equally dismal.

Maurice Duchene, a French explorer, says that he recently found many glacial caves in the Annapurna and Khumbu regions filled with water.

"While the glacial caves were empty in my previous visit, they are now filled with water," said Duchene, speaking at ICIMOD on Tuesday.

According to Duchene, many caves in the glaciers in the Annapurna and Khumbu regions, many of which are more than 50 meters deep, are getting filled by water flowing on the underground rivers under the glaciers. That's bad news not just for the people living higher up in the mountains but also for the people who live downstream.

"I can't say for sure; I leave it to the scientists to decide whether this is happening because of climate change; but I can attest to the fact that the rising water in these caves can certainly cause huge ice blocks to detach from the glaciers, causing massive flooding downstream," he says.

Duchene has photos from his recent expedition to the Kumbu region, all of which show ominous signs. One shows the Imja Lake emptying into cavities, loosening the Imja glacier; and there are other photos of lakes in the region that are today much larger than they were before.

During his presentation at ICIMOD, Duchene showed that various significant changes had occurred in the structure of the Himalayan glaciers, but he said their environmental impact still remained to be gauged.

But just because we can't definitely conclude how global warming's effects will play out in Nepal, it doesn't mean that we can be cavalier about the issue. Citing Nepal's unpreparedness for the current crisis caused by the nationwide forest fires, Ngamindra Dahal says that apart from signing climate change treaties to fulfill its international obligations, Nepal hasn't done anything to prepare itself to deal with the effects of climate change.

He is not alone in his assessment. Many experts are of the opinion that the droughts, flash floods and forest fires that have intensified in our country in the last few years are proofs that climate change does have its effects. These catastrophes, bad as they may be, are only the proverbial signs of things to come. The experts claim that these weather patterns will only intensify in the future, creating bigger disasters. To deal with them will require preparedness on a whole another level.

Max temp in Ktm between April 24 and 28 (3-yr data)

	2007	2008	2009
April 24	27.7	32.0	35.2
April 25	27.3	NA	33.2
April 26	29.2	32.1	32.9
April 27	27.7	31.3	33.2
April 28	28.6	32.9	32.0

NA = Not Available

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