

## Bio-diplomacy in the New Millennium

**Irawan Abidin**

*Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to the Holy See*

The role of the environment in the evolution of international relations is crucial. The Biopolitics International Organisation has introduced a very appropriate term for the pursuit of relations between and among nations that takes into due consideration the environment as an essential factor: bio-diplomacy.

Bio-diplomacy may be logically regarded as simply biopolitics between and among nations, so that one is a large and important part of the other, but still just a part. To my mind, however, these two terms are so intimately related in comprehension that they might as well be one, just as politics and diplomacy might as well be one. At any rate, the survival of humankind in the next millennium hinges on the ability of all who are engaged in public affairs to make a paradigm shift, from one that regards life as just another resource available to humankind, to one that regards life as so precious that its judicious, realistic and sustainable perpetuation should be the ultimate goal of all political, economic and social activities.

The form of life that we are most concerned with, of course, is human life. It has become abundantly clear in recent times, however, that human life cannot be perpetuated for long unless the system that sustains it is also perpetuated. Until we are able to travel to other solar systems in other galaxies, and many scientists are convinced that this will never happen, we must recognise that the destiny of the human race and that of planet earth are inseparable. In fact, they are one and the same. Planet earth is not a machine. It is not a rocket ship hurtling through space. It is a living creature. It is the mother of all that lives on it. We are part of its life. Every living thing on earth, every form of life in the bodies of water and in the atmosphere is part of the earth's vital processes.

Because planet earth is a living thing, it could die. Parts of it have died and are dying. It has the power of regeneration - it can heal itself, but that power is not unlimited. When the earth has suffered too much abuse, it could lose that seemingly miraculous power to resurrect parts of itself that have been destroyed as a result of human recklessness.

We know from experience that we cannot survive without making use of the bounties of the earth, for how else can the human race nourish itself. But now we must learn that neither can we survive when we have used up all the resources that the earth provides. We must find ways of using these resources without destroying them, and exercise faithful stewardship of these resources so that they will still be available to our children and grandchildren and to all future generations. This should become the goal of human society and the objective of all its political, economic and social activities.

All cultures and all societies all over the world have a proper reverence for the earth and the environment. In Southeast Asia, the culture revolves around the cultivation of the life-giving grain, rice, and the coming and going of the monsoon winds that bring rain and guide our trading ships. The same holds true for all ancient cultures, the culture of Greece being one of the best examples of how the forces of nature were given due reverence and consideration. It would do humankind a lot of good if all nations looked back to their ancient cultures and found inspiration for a redefinition of their relationship with their natural environment. For a proper reverence and consideration of the environment to permeate our own modern culture, national educational systems should see to it that this value is inculcated into the minds of school children right from the first day of school. The mass media should participate in this inculcation so that it may never cease.

Another crucial factor that determines the state of the environment is economic activity - the creation of wealth, the turning out of products for human use and survival. In this regard, there are two stark realities that are wreaking havoc on the environment: the desperate need of the poor, whose numbers keep increasing in geometric proportions, and the greed of the rich whose ruthlessness knows no bounds. The term "rich," is not restricted to individual tycoons and national conglomerates, but also, and especially, applies to multinational corporations. There is a considerable number of multinational corporations operating today that have a social conscience. They routinely see

to it that their operations do not damage the environment and if they do any damage to the environment, they undertake commensurate repairs and restoration. But still, too many corporations are irresponsible, and we do not know exactly how many there are because they are good at covering their tracks and governments of developing countries are either too helpless or too corrupt to stop them.

From these considerations we can conclude that it is essential for populous nations in the developing world, including my own country, Indonesia, to earnestly carry out population management programmes so that the pressure of an expanding population on the environment might be eased to some extent. It is also important that social safety-net programmes, especially livelihood and self-employment programmes, be strongly pursued so that the poor will not be constrained to damage the environment in their desperate efforts to eke a bare living. This entails the practice of biopolitics on the part of governments.

Furthermore, it is essential that corporations and industries be properly regulated so that their activities do not pollute the environment. Laws on the environment must be strictly enforced. Governments must invest in their own capacity to regulate the impact of industries on their environment. This kind of governance is also a form of biopolitics.

It is true that degradation of the environment in the poorer countries of the world is often the direct result of their efforts to accelerate their economic development and thus bring about a better life for their peoples. But they must realise that the environment cannot be sacrificed in the name of development, for the death of the environment is a worse debacle than lack of development. Sacrificing the environment, in this case, is like killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Thus, it is the responsibility of developing nations to save their forests, to revive their dead rivers, to protect their marine coastal resources from over-harvesting and pollution, to prevent the pollution of their atmosphere by the smokestacks of their fledgling industries. But this would be a massive undertaking, for which the technology and resources of the developing countries would be too insufficient to be effective. It is the developed nations that have the right technology and resources. Therefore, between the developed and developing countries, there must be a sharing of responsibilities with regard to preserving the global environment on the basis of the fact that both developed and developing countries share the same environmental destiny. Both sides must negotiate toward an equitable sharing of responsibility and resources in addressing this global concern. Such negotiations are exercises in bio-diplomacy.

Although the term "bio-diplomacy" is not widely used, even in diplomatic circles, the practice of bio-diplomacy is rapidly growing in the world today and is expected to continue its rapid growth in the first several decades of this millennium. For example, the stalled negotiations between Syria and Israel are not only about borders and military security. A very important aspect is access and use of water resources. It is very reasonable to suppose that the two sides will not be able to reach a comprehensive settlement unless they are able to arrive at a common view on access and use of these water resources.

In Southeast Asia, it is to the credit of two neighbouring countries, Malaysia and Singapore, that even when there is tension due to some miscommunication, Singapore's water supply, much of which is piped in from Malaysia, has never been the object of any threat. The fact that Singapore depends on Malaysia for much of its water supply is a vital and sensitive aspect of their relationship. Nevertheless, this is a case of sharing of resources that has been successfully negotiated between two neighbouring countries that are willing to help each other in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) spirit.

In northern China, water supply has dwindled to such an extent that it has become an international security concern as much as the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula. Massive social unrest as a result of an internal struggle for control of water supply within China, or a famine brought about by crop failures as a result of lack of water, could have severe repercussions on the security of the East Asian region. The same kind of danger is seen in India where, according to media reports, the problem stems not from a lack of water but from poor management of existing and still abundant water resources. These are two of the most dramatic cases of the problem of water today, but the problem is really world-wide. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNEP), all over the world, more than a billion people are drinking contaminated water. As the supply of water decreases, the deserts

advance and agricultural lands vanish. It has been estimated that an aggregate area of agricultural land bigger than Great Britain is lost to soil erosion every year.

Forests are also being lost at an equally alarming rate: the estimate is that the world is losing its tropical forests at a rate of 1.5-2% every year. This means that if the trend continues, by the time we are half-way through this century that has just begun, there will be no more tropical forests. When that time comes, the earth will be like a human individual whose lungs have been cut off. It is a well-known fact that much of the world's supply of oxygen comes from tropical forests. Remove the forests and you remove the "lungs of the world." As one of two countries in which the world's most extensive tropical forests are found, Indonesia bears a heavy responsibility to the rest of humankind. But today, following the eruption of the Asian financial and economic crisis, illegal logging and the operation of illegal sawmills, which were already rampant for the past several decades, are even worse. The situation has also been aggravated by a pernicious practice perpetrated by plantation operators.

Year after year, during the dry months between March and August, they set expanses of forests on fire in order to clear land on which to plant their commercial crops. Sometimes, they clear too wide a swathe of forestland, or the fire goes out of control and a much larger area than was meant to be cleared is razed. This invariably brings up a massive blanket of smoke that travels great distances, crossing national borders, choking whole populations and disrupting all human activity in a large part of western Southeast Asia. This is the "haze phenomenon" that proved to be a major regional economic and humanitarian disaster in the dry months of 1997 and 1998.

As a result of illegal logging and the clearing of forestlands by fire, the rate of deforestation in Indonesia has become horrendous. Findings by the Ministry of Forestry and Estate Crops show that in 12 years, since 1985, Indonesia lost one-fourth of its forest cover. Today, Indonesia has about 49 million hectares of protected forests and some 63 million hectares for sustainable production; if it keeps on losing these forest lands at the present rate of 1.5 million hectares a year, most of Indonesia will be a virtual desert well before the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A Regional Haze Action Plan is in place in Indonesia, with the close participation of the other ASEAN countries and the support of the Asian Development Bank, the UNEP and the Dialogue Partners of ASEAN, including the European Union, Canada, Australia, the United States and Japan. It is heartening to note that this international effort ranged against the west ASEAN haze phenomenon in 1998 was put together within a remarkably short period; six weeks. This was one instance where a single but enormous environmental problem was addressed through an approach that can only be described as bio-diplomacy.

As such, it has been a shining example of what developed and developing countries can achieve together if they have the will to quickly negotiate and carry out promptly what they have agreed upon. Unfortunately, even such a speedy and massive co-operative effort was not and will not be sufficient to solve the problem. At that time, the two previous governments of Indonesia, in their preoccupation with the Asian financial crisis, did not exercise sufficient political will to strictly enforce laws against the burning of forests. Without that political will, the problem cannot be solved. Hopefully, the reform government of President Abdurrahman Wahid will exercise the political will to squarely confront the problem with the same vigour with which it is now addressing the problem of human rights protection and promotion. This endeavour would be greatly enhanced if the national government were able to enlist the commitment and co-operation of the local power structures and all the stakeholders in the preservation of the forests, because the national government going at it alone will not succeed. It has to enlist the commitment and co-operation of formal and informal leaders at the local level, as well as of stakeholders like the local communities living at the edges of the forests to ensure success of the effort.

This is an approach that is necessary in any attempt to solve any major environmental problem: close co-operation between the centre and the periphery, between the national government and the local power structure, including the grassroots. Considering all this, we can envisage that in the years ahead negotiations will intensify not only between countries but also between parts of the same country. In the absence of a better term, allow me to call this process "internal bio-diplomacy," a diplomacy that is practised between two parts of the same country or society for access and use of life-giving or livelihood-generating resources as well as for sharing of responsibilities in protecting the sustainability of these resources.

Thus, as the water supply of northern China dwindles, there will have to be negotiations on the use and conservation of water resources between the central parts of the country, which needs the water for irrigation, and the coastal parts, which need the water for industry and other urban uses. In India, such a process is already taking place rather fitfully between the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu for sharing the sustainable use of the Cauvery River. They probably will be negotiating more earnestly in the future. In an archipelago like the Philippines, another ASEAN country, there have been and there will be negotiations between water-rich and water-poor island provinces so that one will supply the other with water through inter-island pipes.

In the case of Indonesia it is inevitable, given the desire of some provinces to break away from the Unitarian Republic, that there will have to be negotiations between the central government and the recognised representatives of these provinces. There will be political issues that will have to be addressed, the most important of which is the preservation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic, and the demand of the province concerned for self-rule. But the bottom line is that they will be negotiating about life, about the resources that sustain life and generate livelihood. And if they agree to share these resources at all, they will be negotiating about how these are going to be justly and equitably shared, in such a way that the responsibility for their sustainability will also be justly and equitably distributed. These resources include forestlands, marine and coastal waters, mines and petroleum deposits and other forms of natural wealth. Both sides will have to engage in bio-diplomacy.

We can foresee, therefore, that in the years ahead, bio-diplomacy will become a vital preoccupation of states. They will have to practice it between and among themselves, and within themselves. In view of this, diplomats will have to know more than they do now about the environment. Bureaucrats will have to know more than they do now about the delicate life processes within the environment.

If the practice of bio-diplomacy succeeds, if negotiations over resources generally reach a conclusion that is satisfactory and equitable to all parties, this will lead to a cleaner, greener Mother Earth, whose capacity to sustain human and other forms of life will be much enhanced.

On the other hand, if we who are in public affairs fail in the practice of bio-diplomacy, if we fail in our negotiations or, worse, if we fail to negotiate, unrestrained competition for access and use of life-giving resources could lead to widespread violence within states, and probably war between states. Then human life will become as cheap as ever and the human race will march closer to extinction. This is a consummation devoutly to be avoided. We cannot afford to fail. Therefore, bio-diplomacy is of the most vital importance because it is all about life, and nothing is more precious in this universe than the life of humankind.