



On the Brink



Examine how severe environmental problems can lead to political crises and increased hostilities around the world. Locations: Haiti, India, Peru, South Africa, Mexico and the United States.

“On the Brink” focuses on case studies that link armed conflict and political crises with environmental issues such as the loss of grasslands, spreading disease, deforestation, soil erosion, water scarcities, surging populations and global climate change. The program features the work of scientists, community organizers and political leaders, as they grapple with the fact that the world's political security may be bound up with the quality of the land, air and water.

In this episode, we travel to India/Bangladesh, South Africa, Peru, Haiti, Mexico and the United States. For American audiences, it is particularly important to understand that struggles over natural resources can lead to instability in regions critical to the well being of the West.

In Calcutta, fourteen million inhabitants overwhelm the resources of this Indian metropolis. In the densely populated and crime ridden slums, unemployment is high, and those fortunate enough to find jobs, work long back-breaking hours as part of the city's unskilled and cheap labor force. Despite all the hardships, Calcutta has become a popular refuge for illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh. Over the last two decades, impoverished Bangladeshis have come here seeking a better life. The story of Bangladeshis fleeing their homeland to live in the squalor of Calcutta's slums is about poverty, anger and violence.

Fortunately there are places in the world where much is being done to ease the pain of environmental inequities. South Africa is dominated by the timeless rhythms of nature and the rolling hills of endless green. Despite the victory of independence in 1994, the legacy of Apartheid left hundreds of rural villages without significant opportunities due to a racist policy that located heavy industries away from the countryside. Large urban areas served as indentured work camps that today have been replaced by urban centers like Alexandra. This is a vibrant city of nearly half a million people has become a success story — a place that makes the most of post apartheid freedom. What makes it different from the cities of Bangladesh is its ability and commitment to cope with environmental pressures.



Thanks to an increase in tourism, the city of Lima has undergone a restoration of the colonial look that always distinguished Peru's capital. But the urban renewal never reached Lima's slums — the shantytowns that line the city's perimeter. Built atop one of the world's driest deserts, this is not an easy place to live. Yet it is home to half of Lima's population. Most are unemployed migrants — forced from the remote highlands of the Andes by violence and warfare. Unless the issue of environmental inequities is resolved, millions of Peruvians have very few choices.

Nearly 70% of Haiti is mountainous and the soil is hard to hold in place. Eighty years ago 60% of the country was covered with trees. Today less than 2% remain. Uncontrolled logging and the conversion of forests into farmland have contributed to an environmental nightmare in Haiti. Until the problems of deforestation and poverty are addressed, the people of Haiti are no different than millions of others around the world — those who seek refuge from severe economic and environmental degradation.

The Sonora Desert is one of the most isolated regions in North America. Yet, in places it is littered with debris — left behind by thousands of migrants who attempt to cross illegally into the United States each day. Driven by desperation and armed with dreams, each year more than 400 will die from exposure to the extreme climate in the wastelands surrounding the desert near Douglas, Arizona. On any given day, 20,000 illegal immigrants are held in detention centers all along the border. Most have journeyed thousands of miles — the majority are from Mexico's drought stricken interior. Others are fleeing from the environmental extremes of Central and South America. Extreme poverty leaves people with very few choices.

In a world where recent waves of violence have touched all countries, rich and poor, we cannot ignore the fact that the environment has become a major foreign policy issue of the 21st century. In the end the fate of those living in places like Bangladesh, South Africa and Haiti, in Mexico and Peru, will directly affect the security and well being of people everywhere.

~~~~~