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Transcript: “Intelligence Report Eyes Climate Change-Security Link”

MICHELE NORRIS, host: When one thinks of threats to national security, terrorism may come to mind or various brands of extremism, but climate change?

This month, U.S. intelligence agencies produced their first classified assessment of the significance of climate change for national security. Among the possible consequences: political instability, resource wars and mass migrations.

NPR’s Tom Gjelten reports.

TOM GJELTEN: There’ve been many reports on climate change, but this is the first time U.S. intelligence agencies have weighed in. The 58-page classified report titled, “The National Security Implications of Global Climate Change Through 2030” was quietly delivered to Congress two weeks ago. It’s officially a national intelligence assessment as opposed to an intelligence estimate because the report is based on speculation rather than hard intelligence findings.

The report largely bypasses an analysis of the likelihood of climate change in order to focus on the possible consequences. “It’s an ‘if’ document,” says an official familiar with it.

Still, the report is bound to attract attention. Sherri Goodman is a former deputy undersecretary of defense for energy security.

Ms. SHERRI GOODMAN (Former Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Energy Security): The fact of the intelligence community specifically identifying the national security implications of climate change really brings a new dimension to this. Remember, it’s often these intelligence assessments that provide the key assessments on which decision makers base their decisions.

GJELTEN: With this report, the National Intelligence Council, coordinating the analysis of all U.S. intelligence agencies, puts climate change in the same category as nuclear proliferation, terrorism and radical Islam: It’s officially a security threat. The idea is that rising temperatures could bring a dramatic deterioration of living conditions in places already prone to political stability.

James Ludes of the American Security Project highlighted some of the scenarios in a report earlier this year.

Dr. JAMES LUDES (Executive Director, American Security Project): Some crops just will not grow as temperature increases. And so, some are predicting the return to famine on a scale that we haven’t seen in this world in decades. And if that happens, that leads to greater risk of state failure, and state failure gives an opportunity for extremists of all sorts to cause all sorts of trouble that will be of consequence to the U.S. national security planners.

(more)

GJELTEN: Climate change would mainly be an issue in countries that don't have governments capable of dealing with it. A rise in sea level would affect all countries with coast lines, for example, "but we're not concerned about Holland," says a senior intelligence official who worked on this report. It's countries like Bangladesh that worry him.

Sherri Goodman co-authored a report on climate change last year for the Center for Naval Analyses.

Ms. GOODMAN: At a population of almost 150 million in about the size of Iowa, it's very flat and its coastline exceeds 300 miles. Ten percent of it is within three feet of mean sea level. And its population is continuing to grow and land is becoming increasingly scarce. Frequent flooding coupled with increased storm surge and sea level rise could cause millions to migrate across the border into India.

GJELTEN: Another scenario is the melting of the Himalayan glaciers, a phenomenon that by 2030 could lead to shortages of fresh water especially in Pakistan. In a conflict-prone and nuclear-armed area like South Asia, water scarcity and mass migrations could lead to dreadful violence. Although the intelligence assessment is based primarily on open sources, it is a classified document because of a concern that if the U.S. government identifies endangered countries by name, it could set in motion a chain of events now foreseen as likely only in the future.

But concern is not limited to the developing world. A source who has read the classified report says it highlights the Arctic Ocean region where melting sea ice has opened new passageways and laid the way for a superpower scramble over access to Arctic resources. Just last year, a Russian submarine laid its country's flag on the Arctic Ocean floor to symbolize Russia's claim to the area.

The intelligence report on climate change was originally requested by members of Congress and it'll be the subject of a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

Tom Gjelten, NPR News, Washington.

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