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Combating climate change essential for U.S. national security

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“Climate change has the potential to create sustained natural and humanitarian disasters on a scale and at a frequency far beyond those we see today. The consequences of these disasters will likely foster political instability where societal demands for the essentials of life exceed the capacity of governments to cope.”

That was the grim warning delivered to a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing Thursday by General Charles Wald, USAF, Retired, who is Chairman of the CNA Military Advisory Board and Former Deputy Commander of United States European Command. Among serious threats already created by climate change, Wald pointed to current conflicts caused by fresh water shortages due to changes in rainfall, snowfall, snowmelt, and glacial melt; and conflict in Darfur between herders and farmers due to extended drought which “compelled the nomads to migrate southward in search of water and herding ground, and that in turn led to conflict with the farming tribes occupying those lands.”

Wald said CNA sees unchecked climate change triggering mass migrations and escalating conflict over food, water and other basic resources in the future. He explained that “the most recent scientific evidence reveals that climate change is occurring at a much faster pace than originally believed. The Arctic is a case in point. New evidence and analysis suggests that the Arctic could be substantially ice-free in the summer within in as few as 30 years, not at the end of the century as previously expected.”

Speaking as a military professional, Wald told the committee that “we were trained to make decisions in situations defined by ambiguous information and little concrete knowledge of the enemy intent. We based our decisions on trends, experience, and judgment, because waiting for 100% certainty during a crisis can be disastrous, especially one with the huge national security consequences of climate change. And in the case of climate change, the trends are clear: the global environment is changing.” Challenging the argument that the U.S. can’t afford to tackle climate change without first getting firm commitments from countries like China and India, Wald said that “it is the responsibility of the United States to be first among leaders. If we don’t make changes, then others won’t.”

General Charles Wald, USAF, Retired, “Our nation requires diversification of energy sources and a serious commitment to renewable energy.”

In other remarks, Wald warned the senators that:

- “. . . we cannot pursue energy independence by taking steps that would contradict our emerging climate policy. Energy security and a sound response to climate change cannot be achieved by increased use of fossil fuels. Our nation requires diversification of energy sources and a serious commitment to renewable energy. Not simply for environmental reasons – but for national security reasons.”
- “Unless we take dramatic steps to prevent, mitigate, and adapt, climate change will lead to an increase in conflicts, and in conflict intensity, all across the globe. It’s in this context – a world shaped by climate change and competition for fossil fuels– that we must make new energy choices.”
- “We can say, with certainty, that we need not exchange benefits in one dimension for harm in another; in fact, we have found that the best approaches to energy, climate change, and national security may be one in the same.”

Welcoming the hearing witnesses who called for additional U.S. funding to help developing countries deal with climate change impacts, Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) said he was shocked that “in the context of climate change negotiations, Saudi Arabia is asking to be compensated for the resulting decrease in oil demand.” He said the U.S. instead needs to help not wealthy Saudis but vulnerable developing nations both because “it is the right thing to do” and because “it is also essential to our national security.”

Menendez said “Developed nations have created a planetary problem and we have a duty to help those who are being impacted.” He welcomed the fact that both the House-passed Waxman-Markey climate bill and the similar Boxer-Kerry climate bill being considered in the Senate include “funds designed to provide resources for nations who are most vulnerable to climate impacts”

Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN), however, recommended a cautious approach. Rather than spending more U.S. taxpayers’ dollars, he called for better targeting of existing U.S. programs to help developing countries. He also charged that both the House and Senate climate bills are headed in the wrong direction.

Senator Bob Corker (R-TN) criticizes climate bills for “buying off the hook and bullet guys. . . buying off the agriculture community.”

Corker said the House and Senate climate bills “seem to move away from climate change and they move towards lots of people making lots of money. I mean if you look at the U.S. Cap group [United States Climate Action Partnership (USCAP) of businesses and environmental organizations] and how they as a group benefit from this, you look at buying off the hook and bullet guys that exist all around our county, you look at buying off the agriculture community, you look at buying off every interest group in the world, which basically is taking money out of our economy.” After saying that he considers both energy security and national security important, Corker concluded that there are “some things that merit taxpayer money, some things that do not.”