

cc: T. Murphy
S. Trahern

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Baker City, OR. 97814

December 18, 1991

Brian Lamb
C-Span Call-in

Dear Brian,

I have written before and apparently the card was ignored. Don't you consider the comments and wishes of the thousands of listeners who try and can't get through to you on the phone? We listen several hours of every day, starting at five in the morning, and we have tried several times to get to you on the phone with this request.

We would like very much to hear programs on the environmental dangers and consequences of the Gulch War not only on the desert area involved but on the other continents, including our own. At a recent international conference on this subject most scientists were agreed that it would affect everyone around the globe--the air traffic emissions, the bombs and the burning oil wells and storage tanks.

Carl Sagan on a short interview on CNN recently stated that it could cause a mini-nuclear winter and that the ecological damage could have a serious effect on three billion people. I believe that, if your listeners heard this, perhaps their war-making decisions would change and they would try diplomacy (which they have not) instead of guns and bombs.

This morning on your call-in program a burning oil well was mentioned and the only comment was on a possible increase in gasoline price--do we think of nothing but the economy? More people may die from burning oil wells, plane and missile exhaust after the war is over than are killed in the war.

We still love you and your work.

Sincerely,
[REDACTED]

FEB 5 AM '91

Persian Gulf environment also would suffer war wounds

Burning oil wells, ruined desert soil among tragedies

By GLENNDA CHUI

Knight-Ridder News Service

Long after the shooting stopped, the legacy of a Mideast war could linger in the form of a devastated environment.

Smoke from hundreds of burning oil wells could temporarily chill a fifth of the globe, including the United States, disrupting harvests vital to millions of people.

Massive oil spills could decimate wildlife in the shallow, salty waters of the Persian Gulf.

And the movements of tanks and troops would scar fragile desert, where ecosystems would not recover for centuries — if ever. The evidence for that scarring can be found in California's Mojave Desert, where the tracks from Gen. George Patton's field exercises, involving a million men and 17,000 vehicles, are still clearly visible after 45 years.

"This is pretty much a potential disaster, there's no doubt about it," said Richard Turco, a professor of atmospheric science at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Estimating climate effects

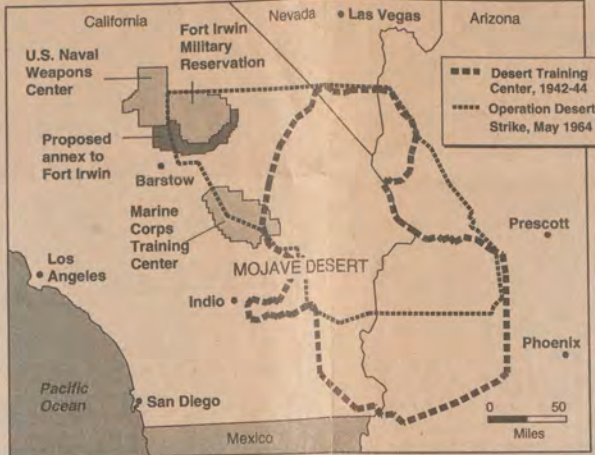
Turco and other experts on nuclear winter have been trying to calculate the potential climate effects of a conflagration in the Mideast oil fields. Their estimates disagree, reflecting the enormous uncertainties involved.

In the classic nuclear winter scenario, a large part of the world's nuclear arsenal is detonated, igniting hundreds of millions of tons of oil, asphalt and plastics and injecting 30 million tons of soot many miles into the air. It spreads over the globe, blocks sunlight and drops temperatures to near freezing in many areas.

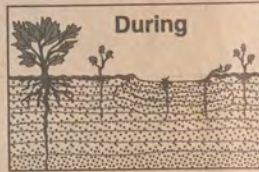
Uncontrolled fires in the Kuwaiti oil wells would put out only a fraction of that much smoke. Its effect on climate would depend on how many wells were torched and how long and vigorously they burned. The more violent the fire, the higher it would spew smoke into the atmosphere and the farther the smoke would spread, said Brian Toon, an atmospheric scientist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Ames Research Center at Moffett Field in the San Francisco Bay area.

WAGING WAR ON THE DESERT

In 1942-44, Gen. George S. Patton took a million men and 17,000 vehicles into the Southern California desert to train for battle in North Africa. Another large-scale tank exercise, Operation Desert Strike, took place in 1964. Their legacy remains: Tent sites, tank tracks and roadways are still visible, and plant and animal communities have been irreparably changed. Scientists say it may take the desert centuries to recover — if it can. Tank training continues at Fort Irwin, where the U.S. Army wants to expand its practice grounds.



The desert's loose, dry, sandy soil, which takes centuries to form, is protected and held in place by a rough crust of lichen.



Tank treads break up this protective layer and compact the soil below and around the tracks.



Unprotected soil is blown or washed away. Most plant roots can't penetrate the remaining soil because it's too dense.

Sources: Harold Wilshire, U.S. Geological Survey, and Doug Prose

Mercury News/KEVIN BOYD

The 1,000 oil wells in Kuwait produce about 2.5 million barrels per day. Iraq is rumored to have mined the oil fields, refineries and storage tanks. If the wells were blown up, they could burn for months, fed by the naturally pressurized mixture of gas and crude oil in the fields below.

In the worst case, Turco said, a black pall of sooty smoke would rise six or seven miles and spread out over the middle latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere, possibly including the United States. It would cover a fifth of the Earth's surface, cutting sunlight to those areas in half.

"That, over a period of several months, is a significant reduction of sunlight," Turco said.

Although temperatures would drop only a few degrees, the chill could disrupt rain patterns, bring unseasonable frosts and "make agriculture very dicey over large areas," he said.

A similar chill followed the 1815 eruption of Tambora volcano in Indonesia. Smoke from the eruption cooled the climate over a wide area, causing crops to fail. The year after the eruption became known as "the year without a summer," Turco said.

However, other nuclear winter experts say that picture is far too pessimistic.

He said smoke might cool the immediate region and possibly even drift a few thousand miles. But most of the effects would be strictly local.

They could include acid rain — formed from the sulfur dioxide released in the burning — and poor visibility for troops. The smoke could block satellite observations and confuse the infrared sensors on weapons.

And then there's ordinary air pollution.

"This would be a nasty problem," said Alan Nixon, a retired chemist

and chemical engineer who works as a consultant in Berkeley, Calif. "You wouldn't want to breathe it too long. And there are some carcinogens in there."

Oil also could flow into the gulf from damaged tankers, pipelines, wells and refineries.

The coast south of Kuwait City is lined with giant export terminals, each capable of handling about 2 million gallons a day, said Philip Brennan, a petroleum geologist who since 1949 has worked in Kuwait.

"They have huge pipelines coming into them, they have storage tanks, and they have refineries attached," he said. "And they are vulnerable." Iraq's two offshore terminals also could be damaged, Brennan added.

No one knows how much oil spilled into the gulf during the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. But the amount was substantial, with

some damaged facilities spewing oil for months, said Edward Owens, a geologist with Woodward-Clyde Consultants in Seattle who specializes in oil-well blowouts.

Yet observers say wildlife is thriving.

"We found oil spills everywhere," said Richard Fralick, a marine biologist at Plymouth State College in New Hampshire who worked in the gulf in January 1990.

"I think there's some leakage going on there now, for sure. What we saw was this asphaltic stuff, probably crude oil, that falls to the bottom and attaches to sand." The resulting sandy blob looks solid, he said, "but if you step on it, it breaks open and oozes" oil.

Nonetheless, he said the waters are still surprisingly clear and clean, teeming with fish, squid and shrimp. Other recent visitors said they've seen shorebirds wading in protected inlets in Bahrain, near beaches encrusted with weathered asphalt, and flamingos flocking on tidal flats.

Gulf wildlife "is relatively used to oil," said Jenifer Baker, a British environmental consultant. "But with any large oil slick, you would expect substantial bird casualties" and fish deaths.

The desert also could be a casualty.

The seeming wasteland actually harbors a fascinating collection of plants and animals that have adapted to living with very little water.

The Mideastern deserts include vast expanses of barren dunes, coastal salt flats, extensive areas covered with gravel and a smattering of hardy plants that serve as fuel and fodder for nomadic Bedouin tribes.

Most areas are well-worn by thousands of years of human occupation. And in the past few decades, damage has accelerated as populations grow and the Bedouins switch from riding camels to driving pickups.

"I'd bet you would see as many camels traveling in the backs of pickups as roaming the range," Brennan said.

As a result, large stretches of desert are covered with tire tracks, observers say.

The tracks destroy the fragile surfaces that hold the sands together, said Harold Dregne, professor of soil science at Texas Tech University.

Much of the surface is "desert pavement" — a top layer of gravel formed over hundreds of years. Once ruined, it takes centuries to form again; in the meantime, the sand beneath blows away, contributing to sandstorms. And when rains come, water no longer penetrates

the soil to nourish plants, but runs off, forming gullies that carry away more soil.

Trampling by soldiers and tanks will further damage the land, to the point at which it no longer may support the Bedouins and their herds, Dregne said. "You're really consigning them to some other part of the country, because the land that's been disturbed by vehicles is not going to recover in decades."

That kind of damage is evident in California's Mojave Desert, which has been extensively used to train U.S. troops for desert warfare.

During World War II, Patton trained a million troops on 15 million acres of the Mojave. The scars are still plain, and the vegetation has not recovered, said Howard Wilshire, a geologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park, Calif., who has studied the effects of off-road vehicles.

Douglas Prose, a geologist who makes environmental films, worked with Wilshire to map and catalog the damage in a study for the Army Research Office.

"Even a single track is an extensive impact," he said of the imprints made by the tanks. It breaks up the surface — which in the Mojave often is held together by gravel or lichen — and lets the sandy soil blow away. It also tamps down soil, making it difficult for animals to dig burrows and plant roots to penetrate.

Desert soil fossils

Desert soils take thousands or even millions of years to form, Wilshire said. Many were created under much different climate conditions than today's, making them virtually irreplaceable.

"They're fossils," he said. "Once you've destroyed them, they're gone."

The study and others like it show that plant life returns slowly to damaged areas and that the species that grow back are often different from the originals. The changes can reverberate throughout an ecosystem, changing entire communities and endangering wildlife.

The Army's current desert training center at Fort Irwin, northeast of Barstow, Calif., covers 640,000 acres; the Army is proposing to expand into 240,000 more acres, home to the threatened desert tortoise as well as golden eagles, kit foxes, coyotes and desert bighorn sheep.

An environmental impact statement is expected early next year; Maj. John Wagstaffe, a spokesman for the fort, said the Army has no plans to try to circumvent the process and speed up approval in the event of a Mideast war.

THE WORLD

Drug kingpin surrenders

BOGOTA, Colombia — A second major figure in the powerful Medellin cocaine cartel has chosen to face



OCHOA

justice in exchange for the government's promise not to allow extradition to the United States, police said.

The surrender Tuesday of Jorge Luis Ochoa and his brother's arranged capture last month stripped the cartel of two of its top leaders, authorities said.

Five other minor drug traffickers have surrendered since the government first offered its no-extradition program Sept. 5.

"This demonstrates that the policy of surrendering to the law offered by the government to drug traffickers is having good results," said Rafael Pardo, presidential advisor on internal security.

MIA remains sought

BANGKOK, Thailand — U.S. military officials flew to Hanoi on Wednesday to retrieve 10 sets of remains that Vietnam says may be those of missing U.S. soldiers, a U.S. official said.

The remains will be sent to Army laboratories in Honolulu for analysis, said James Williams, the U.S. Embassy spokesman in Bangkok.

American escapes death

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — A U.S. citizen who had faced a possible death penalty on a drug trafficking charge was sentenced Wednesday to five years in prison and 10 strokes with a cane for possession of marijuana.

Kerry Lane Wiley, 38, of Sacramento, Calif., "was very upset with the decision" and planned to appeal to the Supreme Court, said his law-

yer, Muhammad Shafee Abdullah.

High Court Judge Shaik Daud Ismail said he found no evidence the 9.3 ounces of marijuana Wiley was charged with trafficking had been for sale. Malaysian law requires that convicted drug traffickers be sentenced to death.

Ballonists to end trip

TOKYO — Fuel problems will force British tycoon Richard Branson and his Swedish co-pilot to abandon their attempt to become the first people to cross the Pacific Ocean in a hot-air balloon, a project spokeswoman said Wednesday.

Branson and partner Per Lindstrand planned to make a "controlled landing" a few hundred miles northwest of Midway Island, said spokeswoman Lori Levin in Los Angeles. Midway is about 1,300 miles

northwest of Hawaii.

Levin announced plans to abandon the flight about 17 hours after the balloon took off from Miyakonojo, Japan, 588 miles southwest of Tokyo at 10:47 a.m. PST Tuesday.

Crash claims 2nd victim

LONDON — A second passenger injured in the Jan. 8 rush-hour train crash at London's Cannon Street station has died, police said Wednesday.

Police said Patricia McCay, 59, of south London, died Friday.

Nearly 250 people were injured when the crowded, 10-car commuter train from Sevenoaks in Kent, southern England, slammed into crash barriers at the station.

Firemen used cutting equipment to free passengers trapped in the mangled train.

Computer operator Martin Strivens, 24, from Orpington, southern England, died from a heart attack on the way to the hospital after being trapped for several hours.

Airline office bombed

TURIN, Italy — Firebombs were thrown during the night at an office representing Pan Am in this northern Italian city, causing a small fire, police reported Wednesday. No one was injured.

Assailants broke the window of the downtown office shortly before midnight, then tossed in three firebombs, said a police official, speaking on condition of anonymity. One did not explode, the official said.

The offices were closed at the time and no one was injured.

— From wire reports

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