Extreme weather worsens global hunger

Peter Moszynski *London*

As Britain has been buffeted by freak weather events, from Boscastle in Cornwall to the Scottish highlands, the UN World Food Programme warns that weather related disasters worldwide are having a devastating impact on global hunger.

Extreme weather and other natural disasters, from the locust plague in west Africa to freezing weather in Peru, are presenting unique challenges, says the World Food Programme, already overstretched by the crisis in Darfur.

"Our people on the ground are struggling to combat the effects of these disasters on millions of hungry people," states John Powell, the programme's deputy executive director. "When you're poor and hungry, losing your home to floods or crops to drought can mean the beginning of the end. Most of the people affected by natural disasters have no insurance policy and no savings to fall back on."

The World Food Programme recently launched a \$74m (£40m; €60m) appeal for 20 million people left destitute by

floods in Bangladesh and a \$97m appeal for drought stricken parts of Kenya. Peru is experiencing its severest cold spell in 30 years. Cuba, undergoing the worst drought in 40 years, was recently ravaged by a hurricane that only made headlines when it hit the US state of Florida.

Most models of climate change predict an increase in both the frequency and severity of extreme weather events.

"In the last few weeks we have indeed been seeing the weather doing strange and dangerous things in many parts of the world," says Femi Oke, weather presenter for the US television channel CNN. "These events can be devastating, especially for the poorest people, who stand to lose everything," said Ms Oke.

"Eight hundred million people around the world know what it is like to go to bed hungry. For some, the threat is extremely grave," cautions Mr Powell.

"In west Africa, the biggest swarm of locusts the region has seen for more than a decade is devouring crops and threaten-

ing to put at least a million people at risk. Countries as far flung as Kenya, Cuba, and Afghanistan are currently in the grip of serious droughts. And in central and South America freak weather conditions have brought flooding to Nicaragua and freezing temperatures to Peru, where mountain villagers have lost livestock and crops after the worst recorded frost and snow storms in almost three decades," he said.

Friends of the Earth's climate researcher Catherine Pearce told the *BMJ*: "Climate change

will hurt most those who have done the least to contribute to the problem—the weakest and most vulnerable around the world. The poorest countries do not have the infrastructure or the capacity to react to the impacts of climate change, which is why the [World Food Programme] is now raising the flag to the global community. We need to be better prepared; predictions are that it will only get worse." □

For more information, see www.wfp.org

Medical bodies urge investigation of alleged involvement in torture

Susan Mayor *London*

Two medical organisations have called for further investigations into the involvement of health workers after allegations that doctors were involved in the torture of prisoners held by US military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, a British charity that treats torture victims, has written to the American Medical Association asking it to initiate an official investigation

of the alleged collaboration of health professionals—including US army doctors—in the intentional infliction of torture on prisoners held by US forces abroad. It has also asked the association to take disciplinary action against any of its members who have knowingly violated the basic principles of medical ethics.

The World Medical Association, an independent confederation of national medical

associations from more than 80 countries, also issued a statement reiterating its longstanding policy of condemning any physician involvement in any abuse and torture of prisoners and detainees.

The responses followed allegations made by Steven Miles, professor of bioethics at the University of Minnesota Medical School, in the *Lancet* last week (*Lancet* 2004;364:725-9). He reviewed a wide range of US government documents, which he said showed that "the US military medical system failed to protect detainees' human rights, sometimes collaborated with interrogators or abusive guards, and failed to properly report injuries

or deaths caused by beatings." This included falsifying and delaying death certificates.

Dr William Hopkins, consultant psychiatrist at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, said: "There is evidence of direct medical involvement in torture and indirect planning for the sophisticated psychological and physical techniques of abuse used against prisoners. We are aware that the AMA has made strong policy statements against torture. We are also aware that the AMA denounces medical participation in torture in its code of ethics. That unequivocal stand needs to be enforced conscientiously." □