Oder floods, 1997; Photo: Kühler

Storms

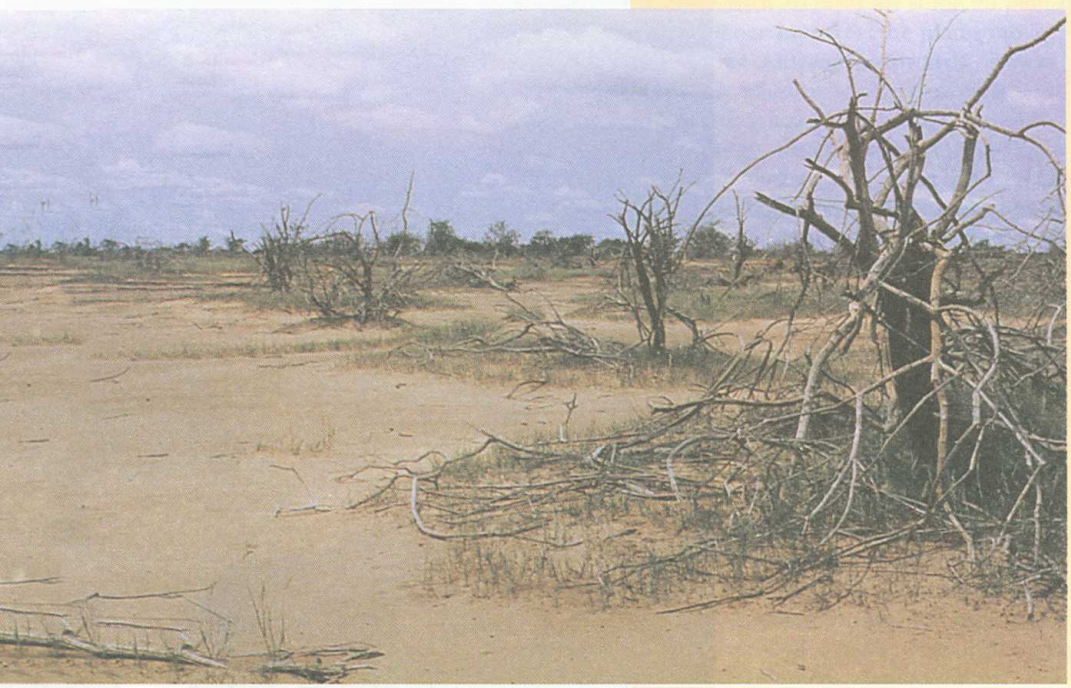
At certain speeds storms can be extremely damaging. In the USA, for example, they come close to the top of league tables for damage statistics. This applies both to loss of human life and to damage to property. Storms are often accompanied by heavy rain. Their capacity for destruction includes tearing the roofs off houses, toppling trees and masts, tossing objects through the air and blocking roads and highways.

Tropical cyclones have a huge potential for disaster. Hurricanes sweep through the Caribbean and North America, typhoons through the Pacific and cyclones through the Indian subcontinent, often leaving total devastation in their wake. They frequently cause tidal waves along the coasts of the Indian Ocean.

Floods

Floods are caused by extremely heavy rainfall though, in most cases, a combination of several phenomena, such as precipitation and melted snow, is responsible. Floods can be particularly destructive if rainfall is restricted to a relatively small area in a very short space of time. In such situations, rainwater is unable to soak away quickly enough nor do drainage systems have sufficient capacity to cope with the excess rainfall.

In this area too, human interference with natural resources is also responsible for our increased vulnerability to disaster. Sealing the countryside, straightening water courses and deforestation have increased the risk of flooding. However, environmental destruction which is accelerating global climate change is also partly to blame for the growing risk of flooding in the long term.



Droughts

Droughts are caused by a lack of rainfall or incorrect distribution of rainfall. They can result in failed harvests and hence to famine. Droughts do not emerge suddenly; rather they are a 'creeping disaster'. In the 1980s, some 35 million people were affected by drought in Africa alone. Armed conflict has since replaced drought as the main cause of famine.

Desertification in West Africa
Photo: Jürgen Gliese

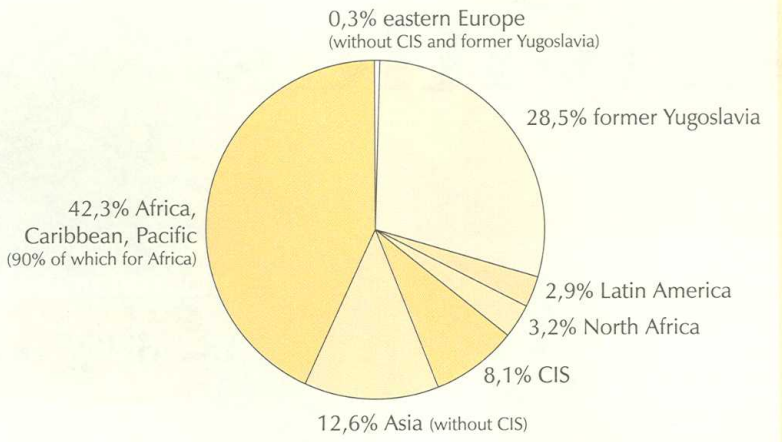
Political disasters

Power struggles, ethnic tension, border conflicts and social crisis can all result in fighting that could be described as a political disaster. The possible consequences of such fighting are fatalities, injuries, displacement and huge waves of refugees, hunger and epidemics as well as economic decline and the emergence of a political vacuum. The war in former Yugoslavia and the events in Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo are examples of this kind of disaster.

Political disasters could often be avoided. As a rule they do not occur overnight but develop gradually. A pro-active policy of prevention could do much to prevent the occurrence of this kind of political disaster. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the international community's readiness to become involved in conflict prevention in hot spots that are neither economically nor politically significant has waned considerably.

The lion's share of German humanitarian assistance is channelled into those regions that have been ravaged by political disaster. By the same token, much of the European Union's humanitarian assistance goes to political crisis regions such as former Yugoslavia and Central Africa.

The Humanitarian Assistance of the European Union



Source: Euopean Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), 1996

Total Humanitarian Assistance from German Ministry for Foreign Affairs in DM

Country	1994	1995	1996
Africa	28,331,370.53	15,830,025.50	25,428,284.22
America	604,550.59	5,030,838.60	1,241,350.40
Asia	10,003,667.15	8,322,874.86	11,493,701.85
Europe	24,263,088.60	56,022,594.89	32,754,331.98
Australia/OZ	–	–	–
Other/IDNDR	1,596,672.82	1,176,157.05	1,749,486,32
UNRWA	5,940,000.00	6,400,000.00	6,400,000.00
Total	**70,739,349.69**	**92,782,490.90**	**79,067,154.77**

Source: German Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Technical disasters

Technical disasters include radioactive contamination, the dispersal of highly-concentrated toxic substances in the environment as well as other technological accidents of whatever form. Extreme natural phenomena can cause technical disasters: an earthquake can, for example, damage a nuclear power station to such an extent that large amounts of radioactivity are released. Likewise, gas and oil pipelines can be ruptured by a quake, which can result in far-reaching fires. Landslides can wash contaminated soil into rivers that provide drinking water for many people. Human responsibility for technical disasters lies, on the one hand, in the development of dangerous technology and, on the other, in the failure to take adequate safety precautions.

The 1986 accident at the nuclear power station in Chernobyl provided a drastic demonstration of the scale technical disasters of this kind can take. The consequences can, under certain circumstances, be felt great distances away from the actual scene of the accident and for decades – if not for centuries – to come.

The consequences of the civil war in Tuzla, Bosnia
Photo: Archive