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Poverty, conflict could make Himalayas ``next Afghanistan": expert

Washington (DPA) - Environmental pressures, poverty and exploitation are feeding conflicts in Himalayan countries that threaten to turn the Asian mountain range into ``the next Afghanistan", a United Nations expert has warned.

Insurgencies or unrest exist in northeastern India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar (Burma), as well as India's disputed Kashmir state and the Tibet region of China, said mountain expert Jack Ives, senior adviser to the United Nations University.

``I can see the whole area from (the Nepali capital) Kathmandu to Myanmar as a potential Afghanistan," the Central Asian country where war has raged between different ethnic and political factions for 23 years, Ives said. ``It's a flashpoint region."

While Nepal is fighting a Maoist rebellion, said Ives, the isolated kingdom of Bhutan is forcibly expelling a quarter of its population, ethnic Nepalis, and the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal are also fighting rebel groups.

The United Nations has declared 2002 the International Year of Mountains, which cover one quarter of the world's land area, are home to 10 per cent of its people and provide more than half of human water needs.

While the European Alps are under intense pressure from two-season tourism and air pollution, a U.N. report said, the Himalaya-Karakorum-Hindu Kush range is beset by ecological destruction, poverty and repression of ethnic minorities.

``The most severe examples of environmental and socioeconomic degradation, of course - now near total disaster - are the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan, the Karakorum and western Himalaya and the disputed territory of Kashmir," said Ives, a Canadian.

While tourism, forest-based industries and over-grazing is adding to the environmental pressure on the fragile region, an ever-growing network of roads is bringing previously

isolated ethnic groups into contact with one another, he said.

“Military and repressive government actions together overwhelm the already serious problems of poverty, drought, deforestation, out-migration and unfair treatment of mountain minority people,” Ives said in the U.N. report released for publication on Sunday.