



Michael L. Ross Delivers Inaugural Al Moumin Lecture on Environmental Peacebuilding

(Washington, D.C.) March 25, 2013—On March 19, Michael L. Ross delivered the inaugural Al Moumin Distinguished Lecture on Environmental Peacebuilding, which was hosted by the Environmental Law Institute (ELI), American University's School of International Service, and the United Nations Environment Programme. More than 80 people attended the event held at American University.

The annual lecture series is named for Mishkat Al Moumin, Iraq's first Minister of Environment, a human rights and environment lawyer, and a Visiting Scholar at ELI. In his introduction to the series, ELI President John C. Cruden observed that the Al Moumin lecture series is part of a broader effort by ELI, UNEP, AU, and other institutions to foster analysis and dialogue regarding the connections between conflict, peace, and the environment, including a book series examining the role of natural resources in post-conflict peacebuilding. "We hope that this dialogue we are starting now will continue," Cruden concluded.

Michael L. Ross is a Professor of Political Science at UCLA, and the author of *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*. His lecture on "Natural Resources and Conflict: A Glimpse into the Future?" built on his pioneering research on the "resource curse." Ross noted that, according to widely accepted data, it is the abundance of natural resources—specifically on-shore oil and alluvial gemstones—that is the greatest risk factor for organized, violent conflict. Ross added that an abundance of these types of non-renewable natural resources is not the only important factor in determining the likelihood of resource-related violent conflict. He explained that these types of conflict are more likely to emerge in poor to middle income countries, while countries with extreme resource wealth and countries that exceed a certain level of per-capita income seem to be relatively immune. A second major risk factor is the presence of oil in minority-dominated regions of a country. Minority groups may feel disenfranchised or fear they will not get a fair share of the wealth the resources generate. Ross also emphasized that resource-linked violent conflict is largely a post-Cold War phenomenon. In his conclusion, Ross further explained that "It's never all about oil, there are always multiple factors... but oil is enough of an accelerant that it can push situations into conflict."

Ross argued that oil triggers conflict for three key reasons: it seems to encourage separatist movements; rebel groups may engage in "resource looting", including extortion and ransom of rig operations and workers, to fund themselves; and some dictatorships supported by funds from oil production find it difficult to retain power when the oil begins to run out.

Ross elaborated on how we can expect these connections between natural resources and violent conflict to evolve in the coming decades. He pointed out that in spite of concerns about climate change, oil demand is expected to rise in the coming years, even by the most conservative estimates. The technologies to extract oil and other non-renewable natural resources have advanced dramatically, opening up once-inaccessible areas for exploitation. Furthermore, while oil companies have historically elected not to extract oil in some turbulent regions, due to increasing demand they are moving into a greater number of countries and into more unstable areas (in particular fragile states). As a result, he concluded that we can expect to see oil extraction increase in regions suffering resource-linked violent conflict. Dispensing with the simple but unrealistic options of leaving the resource in the ground or of growing rapidly to become a middle-income country, Ross presented several methods governments can use to responsibly manage resource wealth. While there was no one-size-fits-all approach, Ross emphasized that transparency, good governance, and citizen empowerment were central to transforming resource-conflict-peace dynamics.

Closing remarks were provided by Ken Conca, Director of AU's Global Environmental Politics Program and a member of UNEP's Expert Group on Conflict and Peacebuilding. Responding to Ross's ideas regarding the future of natural resources and conflict, Conca highlighted the challenges of long-range predictions particularly in light of global developments that can dramatically change dynamics for the worse or for the better.

For more information:

The Environmental Law Institute® is an independent, non-profit research and educational organization based in Washington, DC. For further information from the Environmental Law Institute, please contact Brett Kitchen at +1-202-939-3833 or pressrequest@eli.org.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the voice for the environment in the United Nations system. For media enquiries, please contact the UNEP Newsdesk in Nairobi, Kenya, at +254-20-762-5022 or unepnewsdesk@unep.org.

More information on the lecture and the broader environmental peacebuilding initiative is available at: www.environmentalpeacebuilding.org.