Pity the nation that wears a cloth it does not weave... eats a bread it does not harvest... pity the nation... that boasts not except among its ruins... and those whose art is the art of patching and mimicking."—Kahlil Gibran

When Kahlil Gibran, patron saint of Lebanon, wrote these words he never imagined that the country he was describing would be his own. For like Henry David Thoreau, Gibran was first and foremost poet laureate of the land. "Every time I close my eyes," he once said, "I see those valleys full of magic and dignity and those mountains covered with glory and greatness trying to reach the sky."

But according to Lebanese ecologist Ricardo Haber, Gibran could never describe those magical mountains and valleys today. "Where would he get his inspiration?" asks Haber, founder of a conservationist group called The Friends of Nature. "What landscape would he see?"

Reflected in Haber's despair is the environmental devastation that has left his once-lush country under an avalanche of physical and psychological debris. From the destruction of its famous cedar forests to the now-rancid shores of the Mediterranean, Lebanon is reeling under perhaps the worst ecological disruption suffered by any country in history.

Once a nation whose staple foods included an abundance of fish drawn from the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean, Lebanon, for the first time in its history, is now forced to import fish from Syria and Turkey. According to Haber, the scarcity has resulted from the beleaguered nation's inability to enforce laws protecting the integrity of its sea. Perhaps the major problems, he notes, are the new preferred tools for fishing—dynamite and poison bait. These illegal techniques allow fishermen to catch large numbers of fish, notes Haber, a professor at the American University of Beirut. But they also destroy the ocean habitat. The sea is further polluted by solid wastes and chemicals scattered along the rocky beach. "Treatment facilities were being built," Haber explains, "but we can't construct a plant or regulate an industry with the Shiites on one side of town and the Druse on the other."

At the other end of the ecological spectrum, Haber adds, stand the pitiful remains of the famous cedar forests, whose trees have been cut for camouflage and firewood. Another, less direct cause of deforestation is the vicious shooting of birds—a psychological manifestation, says Haber, of the anger and frustration accompanying the war. In the past ten years, he notes, some 400,000 people have been involved in a "virtual massacre of birds" in the skies over Lebanon. As these birds, including storks, falcons, eagles, and swallows are killed, he notes, the forests' tree-eating insects reproduce unchecked.

 Destruction of the forests, moreover, has caused soil erosion and diminished the supply of fresh water. Without forested watersheds, says Haber, much of the topsoil and rainfall just runs into the sea.

Finally, the disruption of war has also taken its toll on Lebanon's agriculture. Land not destroyed by the negligence of the feuding Lebanese has been devastated by occupying forces, who build trenches and burn crops. And lack of government planning has allowed uncontrolled urbanization at the expense of fertile plains. For Haber, this is where the war has had the most drastic effect. "To my mind," he says, "the worst oppression one can inflict on a people is to destroy their agricultural potential and leave them wanting for food."

But hope for the Lebanese environment appears to be as elusive as an end to the hostilities. A reversal of the situation would require an enormous cleanup effort based on cooperation among all citizens, adherence to existing environmental laws, and creation of an environmental body with full political support.

Such far-reaching changes in a country already losing its identity in the violence among various internal factions may be little more than pipe dreams. For Haber, however, such actions are not just pie-in-the-sky ideas. Unless steps are taken and pressure is brought to bear from the international conservation community, any hope of an ecological reversal may evaporate. "We cannot afford the pace and magnitude of the damage," says Haber, "for the point of no return is imminent."
MAP
FOR "ECOLOGY OF WAR"

MAIN IDEA

Conclusion: