

As It Is – December 3, 2013

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is. I'm Steve Ember.

Today we'll hear about the current threat of huge, very destructive wildfires.

Then to Cambodia, where a university is providing the first formal training for badly needed social workers.

And finally, we celebrate the anniversary of the opening, in 1947, of the classic Tennessee Williams play, "A Streetcar Named Desire."

But first, we hear from experts about that threatening increase in huge wildfires.

Climate Change, Land Use, Human Actions to Blame for Mega-Fires

Australia, Indonesia, Russia , Greece and the United States... Those are just a few places where huge wildfires have been a problem in recent years. In the American West, for example, three wildfires caused major damage earlier this year. Fire experts say most of these fires are a result of climate change, land use and human actions.

[TV News coverage of 2013 Colorado wildfires]

June 2013: The Black Forest Fire destroys more than 500 homes in Colorado. Weeks later in Arizona, the Yarnell Hill fire kills 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots -- a group known for its firefighting expertise. Then, in California, the Rim Fire becomes the third largest fire in state history.

Bill Kaage directs wildland fire operations for the United States Park Service at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. He says huge, costly wildfires were once rare.

“In the western United States, we have larger fires that occur over a larger period of time...”

Mr. Kaage says this change is forcing fire officials to change their methods.

United Nations officials and fire experts say long periods of dry weather are one reason for the fires. They suspect the lack of rainfall results from climate change.

[Helicopter sound and earth moving equipment]

Another suspected cause is land use, including years of protecting new communities in areas where fires were likely. The idea is to aggressively put out all wildfires. That policy is called suppression.

But Stephen Pyne of Arizona State University does not believe the suppression method is successful. He says it has failed in every country likely to have wildfires.

“(When) the smoke is on the horizon, and the TV cameras are out, it seems like an easy solution to call in the troops, bring in the airplanes and the helicopters, bomb it away, and then the problem is gone. All we’ve done is put it off.”

Firefighter: “Turn on your emergency lights...”

Stephen Pyne says suppression is a temporary measure that creates more dangerous fires later. It enables smaller trees and plants to build up. This vegetation acts as fuel that can carry fire to taller treetops.

Firefighter: “We have a burn-out going on the south side...”

Oregon forester Marc Barnes says that when fires burned at low intensity in the past, it would clean the forest. Now, he says, fires are burning at high intensity and destroying all the trees and the forest.

He says money for fire-fighting should be spent on preventive measures like fuel reduction.

“Otherwise, we’re just going to keep having bigger and bigger fires. We’re going to spend more and more and a lot less is going to get done by those agencies.”

He adds that “so much of their budgets are getting eclipsed by the budgets for fire suppression.”

Bill Kaage says the federal deficit has forced agencies like his to cut their budgets for fuel reduction.

“There’s a choice we’ve had to make to make sure we have the engines and the crews available to us for a response.”

The United States Congress has demanded a national plan of action to fight wildfires. Stephen Pyne says the move is, in his words “bold but underfunded.”

It is meant to help government, landowners and others fight dangerous problems that seem to get worse year by year.

As It Is is coming to you from VOA Learning English. I’m Steve Ember.

Cambodian University Provides Training for Social Workers

Next, we visit Cambodia to hear about professional training for people learning to make life better for victims of troubling social problems. Avi Arditti tells us more...

Cambodia has about 3,000 recognized non-profit groups. Some work on issues such as violence against women and human trafficking. But few Cambodians are trained for such work. That is now changing with the country's first university-level degree program for social workers.

Yoeung Kimheng grew up near the city of Phnom Penh. He saw troubling social problems, but few people were in a position to help.

Now, thanks to the university program, he himself may soon be equipped to help. He has finished a four-year program in the Department of Social Work at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. His class is set to graduate later this year. It will be the second graduating class for the department.

Social workers often work with people who have suffered emotional damage. Yet, until the university started the department in 2008, there was no degree-level program in Cambodia for training social workers.

Outreach groups have traditionally depended on foreign experts, or largely untrained local staff who learned on the job.

Ung Kimkanika is a faculty member in the department.

“So I think to have the situation is Cambodian and only Cambodian or Khmer people would understand well about the situation.”

The Department of Social Work at the Royal University of Phnom Penh has a partnership with the School of Social Work at the University of Washington in Seattle. Through that partnership, Ung Kimkanika and other Cambodian students went to the United States to study and earn master’s degrees. Now, they have come back and are teaching other students.

The social work program at the Royal University of Phnom Penh will likely become even more important in the coming months. A war crimes court is nearing the end of one part of a case against former Khmer Rouge leaders. Faculty member Ung Kimkanika says the decision of the court could bring back bad memories among survivors of the communist rulers. I’m Avi Arditti.

“Hey, Stella!” – Remembering “A Streetcar Named Desire”

[Music by Alex North from “A Streetcar Named Desire”]

I’m Steve Ember with As It Is, coming to you from VOA Learning English.

And

now, we remember the opening of Tennessee Williams' play, "A Streetcar Named Desire" on Broadway in New York on December 3rd, 1947. The story tells of a violent clash between Stanley Kowalski, played by Marlon Brando, and Blanche DuBois, played by Jessica Tandy. Kim Hunter played the role of Stella, Stanley's wife.

The play's sexual violence shocked the audience. When the drama was finished, people sat in silence for a minute. Then they applauded for half an hour.

Marlon Brando (from the film version of "Streetcar"): "Hey, Stella!"

The young Brando immediately became a star. He went on to play Stanley Kowalski in the movie version. Jessica Tandy won a Tony Award for her performance. Tennessee Williams won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

And that's our show for today. As It Is is a production of VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember. See you next time.

Marlon Brando with Kim Hunter (from the film version): "Don't ever leave me, baby." [Stella sobs]