

# World Water Crisis

**Thalif Deen**

When UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland last January, his primary focus was not on the impending global economic recession but on the world's growing water crisis.

"A shortage of water resources could spell increased conflicts in the future," he told the annual gathering of business tycoons, academics and leaders from governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations.

"Population growth will make the problem worse. So will climate change. As the global economy grows, so will its thirst. Many more conflicts lie just over the horizon," he warned.

Anders Berntell, executive director of the Stockholm International Water Institute, says the lack of safe drinking water for over 1.0 billion people worldwide, and the lack of safe sanitation for over 2.5 billion, "is an acute and devastating humanitarian crisis."

"But this is a crisis of management, not a water crisis per se, because it is caused by a chronic lack of funding and inadequate understanding of the need for sanitation and good hygiene at the local level," Berntell told IPS.

He said : "This can and must be fixed through improved governance and management, and increased funding, and sustained efforts to achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)," which include the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger and adequate water and sanitation.

A UN study released on the eve of World Water Day Mar. 22 says the lack of safe drinking water is not confined to the world's poorer nations; it also threatens over 100 million Europeans.

The result: nearly 40 children in Europe, mostly in Eastern Europe, die every day due to a water-related disease: diarrhoea.

In Eastern Europe, about 16 percent of the population still does not have access to drinking water in their homes, while in rural areas, over half of all people suffer from the lack of safe water and adequate sanitation.

"The world water crisis is definitely very bad, particularly because it deals with mismanagement of water and how governments have failed to secure the involvement of local communities in the management of water," says Sunita Narain, director of the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment, and the 2005 winner of the prestigious annual Stockholm Water Prize.

"We, as societies, have failed to use small amounts of water for bringing large productivity gains," she said.

However, today the world water crisis faces yet another challenge—one of climate change, Narain told IPS.

"And it is this challenge which the world is completely failing to do anything about, and which will jeopardise the water security of large numbers of people, who already live on the margins of survival," she declared.

Responding to a question, Berntell admitted there is a "world water crisis" judging by the number of people without safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

And this, he said, "in a world which has the financial wealth and technical wherewithal to solve these twin scandals".

“We must find better ways to manage water resources, in so far as water pollution is concerned, and to meet the food requirements of a human population which will expand by over 3.0 billion people in 2050.”

“We also must meet the water-climate challenge. Everything could become much more desperate and severe in the future if the proper steps are not taken,” he added.

So, it is important, Berntell argued, to make a distinction between the water resource crisis — which is primarily caused by an overexploitation of water resources for agricultural and industrial use, as well as pollution — and the water service and sanitation crisis.

In a statement released Wednesday, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) said many rivers in developing countries and emerging economies are now polluted to the brink of their collapse.

“The Yangtze, China’s longest river, is cancerous with pollution due to untreated agriculture and industrial waste,” IUCN warned

Meanwhile, arguing that water shortages will drive future conflicts, the UN secretary-general says the slaughter in Darfur—described as “genocide” by the United States— was triggered by global climate change.

“It is no accident that the violence in Darfur erupted during the drought,” Ban said. When Darfur’s land was rich, black farmers welcomed Arab herders and shared their water.

With the drought, however, farmers fenced in their land to prevent overgrazing. “For the first time in memory, there was no longer enough food and water for all. Fighting broke out,” he said.

“Water is a classic common property resource. No one really owns the problem. Therefore, no one really owns the solution,” he declared.

Asked if the United Nations and the international community are doing enough to help resolve the problem or even draw attention to it, Narain told IPS : “Definitely there has been an attempt over the last few years to understand both the nature of the crisis as well as to draw attention to it.”

“However, I believe that the international community’s understanding of what needs to be done to resolve the water crisis has been both weak as well as misplaced.”

The reason, she pointed out, “is that the international community does not understand water and how it affects local communities and, therefore, the United Nations and the international community is looking for quick fix technological solutions to what is primarily a governance issue.”

Berntell took a different perspective. “Unquestionably,” he said, “water, and in particular sanitation, remain far too low on the international agenda.”

Access to clean water and sanitation underpin all human development efforts, and water issues are central to climate change adaptation and sustainable development. “But much more needs to be done to address the spectrum of challenges,” he told IPS.

The UN system, and the “UN-Water” collaborative effort in particular, works extremely hard and well and is consistently improving its efforts to better coordinate and make more effective its work, he said.

The UN’s declaration of 2008 as the International Year of Sanitation has catalysed increased action and attention to critical health and hygiene issues this year, Berntell added.

“Still, the UN must strengthen its efforts to coordinate its monitoring and reporting. They cannot afford to continue delivering too many reports on overlapping issues at the same time.”

A good starting point, he said, would be the “five ones” identified by Britain : one annual global monitoring report; one high-level global ministerial meeting on water; at country level, one national plan for water and sanitation; one coordinating body; and activities of UN agencies on water and sanitation to be coordinated by one lead body under the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and its country plan. □□