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Water Crisis Offers Chance for Unity over Strife

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WASHINGTON, Jul 30 (IPS) - As record-breaking temperature highs and rapidly melting ice caps fuel fears about impending "water wars", some experts in Washington say that the threat of full-blown conflict is exaggerated, adding that robust institutions and solid treaties could transform water crises into international cooperation.

The planet is currently home to 276 international river basins, which cover almost a half of the earth's land surface and are home to 40 percent of the global population.

Many of these basins cross boundaries with no regard for the incendiary politics that divide nations, religions and peoples. In fact, a full 80 percent of the world's fresh water originates in basins shared by two or more countries.

However, while the risk of water wars has long made headlines, new research suggests that possible cooperation over shared resources would be a better, and more accurate, message.

"Those of us who work on issues of international water management see only the boundaries of watersheds themselves, we see the things that unite us, that bring us together," Aaron Wolf, a professor of geography at Oregon State University, told a panel at the [Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars](#) in Washington on Thursday.

"We understand that everything - surface water, water quantity, water quality, populations that lives in the basin, the wildlife - is all connected together," said Wolf, adding that history offers very few examples of declared armed hostilities over water itself, the only unambiguous case being a conflict almost 4,500 years ago.

Much more prevalent, Wolf argues, has been the signing of treaties on the issue of shared basins.

The [Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database](#) (TFDD), a project of Oregon State University's Department of Geosciences in partnership with the Northwest Alliance for Computation Science, carried out extensive research into the history of water-related conflict, referencing over 3,600 international treaties signed between the years 805-1997.

Rating water-related events between the years 1948-2008, the database found only 21 cases of "extensive military acts" compared to 682 instances of "mild verbal support" for treaties. The same period also witnessed the signing of 145 treaties on shared water resources.

Jim Duncan, a consultant to the World Bank and co-author of the Bank's 2010 [report](#) "Mapping the Resilience of International River Basins to Future Climate Change-Induced Water Variability", believes that, though climate fluctuations are contributing to increasingly tense relationships in the hydropolitical sphere, the possibility of open hostilities or conflict is directly proportional to the ability of institutions to mitigate those changes.

In fact, Wolf claims, "The likelihood of conflict rises as the rate of change within the basin exceeds the institutional capacity to absorb that change," adding that institutions need to form and flex their muscles in order to stave off water catastrophes; uncoordinated development, or major projects in the absence of treaties, were much more likely to cause conflict than creeping climate change.

However, not everyone shares this optimism about mitigating water wars.

Matt Zentner, a hydrologist at the U.S. Department of Defence, said in Washington Thursday that 1.4 billion people currently lack access to safe water, 2.4 billion people live in situations of grossly inadequate sanitation and five to seven million people a year perish from water-borne diseases.

The World Bank reported earlier this year that 2.8 billion people live in areas of high "water stress", a number that is expected to hit 3.9 billion - half the world's population - by 2030.

Every minute, 15 children die from unsafe drinking water, the bulk of them in the developing world. Meanwhile, 2,400 litres of fresh water are required to produce every single hamburger, which are consumed at the rate of 75 per second, according to McDonald's.

Put another way, the average person living in arid lands on the continent of Africa uses 10-40 litres of water a day, compared to the 300-600 litres guzzled by European or North Americans living in urban centres.

These dramatic inequalities in access, experts argue, cannot be maintained without conflict.

Referencing a 2010 Senate report presented to the U.S. Committee on Foreign Relations in February, the founder of Green Growth Leaders Erik Rasmussen stressed in an article last month that "[The] growing water scarcity is a primary driver for insecurity, instability and conflicts and is currently setting the stage for future water wars - unless global action is taken."

Little-known facts about the supply of fresh water in the world today appear to verify Rasmussen's fears.

According to the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), only one percent of fresh water - less than 0.007 percent of all the water in the world - is easily accessible. Underground water tables, or aquifers, take 1,400 years to be fully replenished. Given the mismanagement of water for agricultural production – accounting for 70 percent of all water withdrawals – an impending crisis looks all the more likely.

Back in [2009](#), Colin Chartres, the director general of the [International Water Management Institute \(IWMI\)](#), said that a "nothing short of a blue revolution" would be necessary to meet the water challenges of the 21st century. Actions thus far have not met this call.

"The current state of affairs demands that we act now," Rasmussen said. "We need a new way of thinking about water. We need to stop depleting our water resources, and urge water conservation on a global scale."

"We need to ensure 'more crop per drop', Rasmussen added. "While many developing countries use precious water to grow one tonne of rice per hectare, other countries produce five tonnes per hectare under similar social and water conditions, but with better technology and management."

"Thus, if we behave intelligently, and collaborate between neighbours, between neighbouring countries, between North and South, and in the global trading system, we shall not 'run out of water'. If we do not, and 'business as usual' prevails, then water wars will accelerate," he concluded.

(END/2011)

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