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INTERVIEW-World water demand surging due rising population

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By Alister Doyle, Environment Correspondent

STOCKHOLM, Sept 18 (Reuters) - Surging demand for irrigation to grow crops for food and biofuels will add to pressure on water supplies in a world where one in three people already suffer from shortages.

Following is an interview with Frank Rijsberman, the Dutch director general of the U.N.-backed International Water Management Institute, which issued an assessment of world water resources in late August based on the work of 700 researchers.

Q. What are your main findings?

A. Our results show that a third of the world population is facing water scarcity. There's two types of problem: about a quarter of the world's population lives in areas with physical water scarcity -- in places like the United States, Australia -- and more than a billion people live in areas where water is available but not fully exploited. In sub-Saharan Africa the water is in the rivers but there are no dams or pumps to use it.

Q. Can the problems be solved?

A. The positive message is that we can increase what we call the productivity of water. We will simply have to make do with less, get more out of the water we do have. That can mean growing drought-resistant varieties of crops, having better policies in government. While it currently takes about 2,000 litres of water to produce a kilo of rice it's possible to drive it down to about 500 litres a kilo. That's the challenge.

Q. Will biofuels make it harder to feed the world by taking land previously sown for food crops?

A. About 800 million people do not have enough to eat and now on top of that, because there are currently high oil prices, people come up with this marvellous idea to grow biofuels. Yes, we can grow biofuels instead of using oil but we should then take into account that that will use a massive amount of water that is not in our calculations. That, economic growth in China, climate change, those are the key drivers of changes in water and food.

Q. What will it cost to sort out the world's water problems?

A. It will take more human ingenuity and creativity, some courageous politicians, some investments in research, different types of investments. It doesn't even have to cost that much more -- it's just doing the smart thing.

Q. Do you think that wars will be fought over water in the 21st century?

A. I don't really expect wars over water because ... the benefits of collaboration are so great. We see a lot more countries that come up with good agreements (over water). At the same time there are many places where there are tensions over water.

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