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Conflicts over water have potential to be catalyst for peace, cooperation, specialist tells Second Committee panel discussion

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Panel Discussion (AM)

Panelist Calls for 'Blue Revolution' As Global Population Grows Amid Shrinking Water Resources for Agriculture

Conflicts over water -- the world's most precious resource -- were at the heart of regional instability, but they could be a catalyst for cooperation and peace if managed properly, Aaron Wolfe, a specialist in water resource policy and conflict resolution, said this morning during a panel discussion on "Enhancing governance on water" held by the Second Committee (Economic and Financial).

"Two thirds of the time we do anything over shared water, we cooperate. That is hugely important," said Mr. Wolfe, Programme Director in Water Conflict Management and Transformation at Oregon State University. Politicians often threatened to take to the battlefield over water turfs, but the last formal war over water had been fought in 2,500 B.C. between two Sumerian city-States contesting the Tigris Basin, he added.

Since then, more than 3,600 water-related treaties governing boundary demarcation and navigation had proven to be resilient over time, even as cross-border conflicts raged, he said, pointing out that the Mekong Committee, created in 1957, had held technical exchanges throughout the Viet Nam War. The Indus River Commission had survived two wars between India and Pakistan, and the last armed conflict in which Arabs and Israelis had fought over water had taken place in 1970.

The problem was that water was often managed unilaterally and thus inefficiently, and was used to exacerbate tensions, he said. Water itself did not respect political boundaries, but Governments used man-made borders to protect their sovereignty, economies and nationalities. Furthermore, policy discussions over water issues focused too much on global trends and solutions, while neglecting the regional and subregional water disputes that were a real security concern, responsible for poverty, disease and degradation in many parts of the world.

"This is as big as malaria, as big as HIV/AIDS. It's bigger than tsunamis, bigger than earthquakes. It's a crisis as big as we face," said Mr. Wolfe. More than 1 billion people lacked access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion -- about half the world's population -- had no access to basic sanitation. Every year, water-related ailments made 250 million people sick and claimed the lives of between 2.2 million and 5 million more, he said in conclusion.

Committee Chairperson Park In-kook (Republic of Korea) said that loss of clean water for ecosystems, lack of water for food production and water pollution by industries were real challenges in need of solutions. Maintaining a peaceful world when climate change and rising temperatures made water resources increasingly scarce, must be treated as a priority.

Concurring with that assessment, Colin Chartres, Director of the [International Water Management Institute](#), noted that, because of climate change and other issues, water had become scarcer over the last few decades, and emphasized that water issues must be addressed in a holistic manner. But while water availability had changed, human habits had not. After the green revolution in agriculture, it was crucial to enable a "blue revolution". As the global population grew, the challenge became clear: the world would have to feed another 2.5 billion people with less water for agriculture than was now available.

Using world maps, he outlined the regions where water was most scarce, predominantly Africa, South America and South-east Asia, and said countries must focus on providing the poor with drinking water, sanitation and water for agriculture. Solutions depended on investment and science to increase water productivity and reduce

health and environmental risks from contaminated waters. Governance reform was vital as it could help bring about a more equitable allocation. "Demand is going to outstrip supply of water over the next few years," he said, reiterating that climate change would compound the problem. In many zones where water was already scarce, temperatures were likely to rise.

With regard to solutions, he said it was important to think broadly and laterally. Countries would have to look at conservation, "water harvesting" and various types of irrigation, among other things. There were a range of solutions for different countries at different stages of development. In Asia, for example, investing in irrigation was vital to improve productivity, while in sub-Saharan Africa, water infrastructure must be developed. In general, it was crucial to sink funds into the blue revolution but with consideration for biophysical, social, economic and institutional settings. About 65 million rural poor in sub-Saharan Africa and 70 million poor in India could benefit from such interventions, which were estimated to cost about \$115 billion in sub-Saharan Africa and \$156 billion in India.

Looking ahead, he said the world would not be able to double food production in the next 40 years if things continued as they were, and a discussion of water reform was necessary. Annual investments in agricultural development must increase by 50 per cent, from \$142 billion to \$209 billion, to meet food demands, according to estimates from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). There was compelling evidence that the decline in official development assistance (ODA) had caused agricultural productivity to fall, and if that trend continued, the world would not be able to feed its population in another 30 or 40 years. However, the cost of preventing a global food and water crisis was small compared with the financial crisis bailout, which the BBC had estimated to cost more than \$10 trillion.

Ertuğrul Apakan, Permanent Representative of Turkey to the United Nations, said the pressure on water resources continued to intensify as consumption of water had grown at more than twice the rate of population increase in the last century. By 2025, 1.8 billion people would live in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, according to United Nations statistics. There was therefore a need for supply and demand management.

He said agriculture consumed the most freshwater resources, and in order to keep up with the growing demand for food, 14 per cent more freshwater would need to be withdrawn for agricultural purposes over the next 30 years, according to some estimates. "As the world changes, we need to adapt ourselves to water scarcity and water abundance," he added, noting that trans-boundary water issues, for example, were becoming a problem as the current political, legal and institutional infrastructure was unable to deal with the complexity of the issue.

During the Fifth World Water Forum, held in Istanbul in March, stakeholders at all levels had come together to develop a dialogue and increase cooperation among water users, he recalled. The Istanbul Declaration of Heads of State had called for greater water security and climate adaptability through more strategic use of the world's most precious resource. He described the Forum as a sustainable development that would help decision-makers develop relevant water management policies, and stressed that water deserved a higher priority on the world's agenda than it currently enjoyed.

Nikhil Chandavarkar, Secretary of UN-Water and Chief of the Communication and Outreach Branch in the Sustainable Development Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, said UN-Water had been established in 2003 as the inter-agency mechanism to deal with water-related issues vis-à-vis the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Millennium Development Goals. Its focus areas included water scarcity, sanitation, trans-boundary waters, climate change, financing and disaster reduction, among other things. It operated mainly through task forces.

He said each thematic initiative was hosted by a lead agency and relied on a network of contributing partners. The three pillars were: best practices and technical advice; knowledge and monitoring; and policy guidance and institutions. Historically, there had been a lack of coordination on water initiatives and, eventually, recognition had built within the United Nations system that more cohesiveness and organization was needed, thus the creation of UN-Water. It had its own financial resources, received funding from donors, and produced policy briefs and major documents as well as monitoring reports, which were not just for use within the system but could also be used by decision-makers and the public at large. All were available at the UN-Water website, www.unwater.org.

During the ensuing question-and-answer session, Mr. Chartres said it was important to start thinking about the pricing of water, in part because a pricing mechanism could be used to drive up efficiency. The world could not go on with business as usual — in 20 to 40 years, countries would have to produce the same amount of food as they did today, but with less water. The key was to get the right kind of information to identify the appropriate solutions. Furthermore, there was a need to build capacity among poor farmers so as to drive up productivity. On the national level, water governance reform would have to be enacted.

Mr. Wolf responded to a question about the relationship between dams and the environment by emphasizing the

need for added storage capacity given the changing weather patterns caused by climate change. However, it must be carefully handled, he cautioned. Several states in the western United States were looking at the possibility of building large dams because of increasingly volatile weather. With snow caps melting globally, raising questions about supplies to the 1.3 billion people who relied upon water from the Himalayas, there was no question that the world would have to look again at increasing storage capacity to mitigate shortages, but it would have to be considered carefully.

In answer to a question about international cooperation, he said there was a need to grow and enhance global meetings but parties should not try to agree too much. The more countries strove for consensus, the less those meetings accomplished. Instead of compromise, countries should seek real solutions because water scarcity was "as destructive as anything else out there", he said, adding: "Our lack of will to grapple with this issue is astonishing and perhaps criminal."

On the role of local authorities, Mr. Apakan said they were the main providers of water services. During the Fifth Water Forum in March, mayors and local authorities had adopted the Istanbul Water Consensus after almost 18 months of negotiations. It set forth the perspectives of local authorities, the role of which must be reassessed and upgraded.

Concerning the budget of UN-Water, Mr. Chandavarkar said it should not be judged by the \$3 million it received in direct funding. The budgets of the water divisions of its 26 participating agencies were far larger than that amount, and the \$3 million should be seen as seed money for larger capital investments.

On the role of desalination, he said that subject was dealt with in chapter 9 of the World Development Report. There were important environmental impacts to consider as water from industrial use was recycled back into the sea. An estimated 0.4 per cent of the world's water came from desalination, a figure that would double in the coming decades. While an important source, desalinated water was not the "silver bullet" it was made out to be.

Asked whether UN-Water should remain a coordinating mechanism or become a United Nations agency, he said each of its partner institutions had sent strong signals against its morphing into an agency. As for funding concerns, only three generous donors were providing money for its multi-donor trust fund. He encouraged new and emerging ones to contribute so the financial burden could be shared more evenly.

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