



The rising pressure of global water shortages

Water is becoming more scarce as populations increase, potentially leading to conflict. The age of hydro-diplomacy is upon us, says Jan Eliasson.

The world is experiencing a surge of water-related crises. The eastern basin of the Aral Sea dried up completely in August, for the first time in 600 years. California has experienced an unprecedented three-year drought. Demographic changes and unsustainable economic practices are affecting the quantity and quality of the water at our disposal. Rapid urbanization is creating huge pressure on water use and infrastructure, with lasting consequences on human health and urban environments. These changes make water an increasingly scarce and expensive resource — especially for the poor, the marginalized and the vulnerable.

Demand for water is projected to grow by more than 40% by 2050. By 2025, an estimated 1.8 billion people will live in countries or regions in which water is scarce, and two-thirds of the world's population could be living in conditions in which the supply of clean water does not meet the demand.

The picture is not entirely dark. Thanks to global mobilization behind the Millennium Development Goals, 2 billion people have benefited from access to improved water sources.

Still, let us remember that 750 million people do not have access to safe drinking water. Roughly 80% of wastewater is discharged untreated into oceans, rivers and lakes. Nearly 2 million children under the age of 5 die every year for want of clean water and decent sanitation. One billion people in 22 countries still defecate in the open. Two and a half billion people do not have adequate sewage disposal.

That is why I launched the 2013 Call to Action on Sanitation on behalf of the United Nations Secretary-General. We want to break the silence and taboo surrounding toilets and open defecation. These words must be natural elements of the diplomatic discourse on development.

In today's world, we see how the lack of access to water can fuel conflict and even threaten peace and stability. That is why in the coming year I would like to see more attention on what I call hydro-diplomacy.

Degraded access to water increases the risk of social tensions, political instability and intensified refugee flows. Even more disturbing is when we see this resource used as a weapon of war.

I witnessed this first-hand during the Darfur conflict in Sudan. On one trip in 2007 to a village in north Darfur, we were met by a group of women chanting: "Water, water, water." The enemy militia had poisoned their well, they said, forcing them to move to the overcrowded camps for internally displaced people.

In Iraq, ISIL has exploited access to water to expand its control over territory and to subjugate the population. This extremist group has cut off water to villages that resist its advance. It

has deliberately flooded substantial areas of land, displacing thousands of civilians. In recent months, it has directed its operations to Iraqi hydroelectric dams — in particular, the Mosul dam. All of Mosul and 500,000 people in Baghdad would be in grave peril if the dam were to burst — a chilling prospect.

We have also seen tensions related to large hydroelectric projects, such as the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Neighbouring countries have expressed deep concerns, and energy and agricultural interests are clashing.

Still, it would be a mistake to get caught up in 'water-war' rhetoric. Certainly, as freshwater shortages become increasingly acute, the threat of violence over water is a real one. But we must not lose sight of the opportunities that water offers as a source of cooperation.

Tensions over water resources have historically led to more collaboration than conflict. Shared water has brought states together; the 1960 Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan survived three wars and remains in force today.

In other words, water can and should drive cooperation and conflict resolution. More than 90% of the world's population lives in countries that share river and lake basins, and 148 countries share at least one transboundary river basin. Almost 450 agreements on international waters were signed between 1820 and 2007. The Water Convention that was forged under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe in 1992 is one such notable agreement.

Moreover, shared water access can create space for inter-state dialogue on points of contention

that, if left unattended, may threaten regional or international peace and security. One recent example of such cooperation is among countries of the Lake Chad Basin. Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria established the Basin Commission in 1964 to manage the declining waters of Lake Chad equitably. They were later joined by other concerned states, including Libya and the Central African Republic. This year, the mandate of the commission was expanded to cover regional security challenges such as terrorism, the arms trade and cross-border insurgencies.

All this to say that hydro-diplomacy is a reality. The potential for shared management of water as a means to achieve regional cooperation and conflict prevention is vital. In 2015 and beyond, through efforts in diplomacy, economics and scientific research, we need to focus on water as a source of cooperation, rather than as a source of conflict. ■

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