

The world's forgotten crisis

Over a billion people cannot get clean water, and things are getting worse.

This week in Japan, some 10,000 delegates from across the globe will meet to examine what, for many of the world's poorest people, are issues of life and death. At sessions in Kyoto, Shiga and Osaka, the 3rd World Water Forum will highlight a crisis that currently forces more than one billion people to drink from sources contaminated with human waste, and leaves countless millions more with insufficient supplies to water their crops, or to spur industrial development. The meeting is the culmination of the International Year of Freshwater 2003, declared by the United Nations to raise awareness of the worsening state of the world's water resources.

Given that goal, the forum could hardly have been held at a less opportune moment. Events in Iraq may limit media coverage of the 3rd World Water Forum to mere footnote status. "Our discussions will have far more effect on humankind in the twenty-first century than the current crisis in the Middle East," claims William Cosgrove, vice-president of the World Water Council, a think-tank dedicated to improving water resources. But the forum's organizers must know that there is little hope of gaining firm commitments from nations that are focused on war.

Cosgrove may nevertheless be right. The water crisis is real. If action isn't taken, millions of people will be condemned to a premature death. According to the *World Water Development Report*, a UN survey

prepared for the forum, population growth, pollution and climate change are conspiring to exacerbate the situation. Over the next two decades, the average supply of water per person will drop by a third. Heightened hunger and disease will follow. Humanity's demands for water also threaten natural ecosystems, and may bring nations into conflicts that — although they may not lead to war — will test diplomats' skills to the limit.

In the following pages, *Nature* summarizes the global water crisis through a series of maps and graphics, and then uses the case study of Bangladesh to reveal the scientific and political complexities involved in addressing a nation's requirement to be supplied with — and sometimes protected from — water.

Numbers alone can never tell the whole story, but our graphical summary helps to emphasize the intimate link between poverty and the water crisis — it's no coincidence that water-borne diseases impose a far greater burden on sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else. And as our case study emphasizes, science must have a frontline role in addressing the issues involved. Without

the skills of specialists such as hydrologists, meteorologists and epidemiologists, there can be no workable solutions.

But although necessary, scientific expertise is far from sufficient. "Inertia at the leadership level, and a world population not fully aware of the scale of the problem, means we fail to take the needed timely corrective actions," the *World Water Development Report* concludes.

Until now, the report charges, there have been too many empty promises. In 2000, as part of the UN Millennium Development Goals, governments agreed to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water by 2015. The pledge was reinforced at last year's World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. But on current form, there is no chance of it being met.

Aware of the danger of becoming yet another talking shop, the organizers of the 3rd World Water Forum have asked delegates to come ready to make concrete commitments to measures designed to help solve the water crisis. The question is: when the smoke from the current confrontation in Iraq finally clears, will the world remember to hold the forum's participants to account? ■

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International Year of Freshwater 2003

♦ www.wateryear2003.org

3rd World Water Forum

♦ www.world.water-forum3.com

