

World Water Forum in Kyoto

Declining water supply may cause disease and death in developing countries



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BOTTOM LINE

At Kyoto, this month the World Water Forum will focus on the unprecedented height of water crisis and will argue for world leaders to fight their political inertia over water issue and come to grips to avoid catastrophic potential in the next few decades by introducing right water policies in the regions all over the world. In the Bangladesh context, water sharing of all 56 common rivers with India is a priority. India has been building dams in many of the common rivers and it is reported that it has built 100 dams on common rivers for the purpose of withdrawing waters upstream.

THE World Water Forum is being held in Kyoto (Japan) from 16 to 23 March. The Forum will consider the

availability of fresh water for the world's population in the coming decades. Experts say that population growth, pollution

and climate are likely to combine to produce a drastic decline in the coming decades and the Forum is to address the strategies as to how to cope with the situation.

Although the surface of the earth is two-thirds water, 97 per cent of it is undrinkable sea water. The words of English poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) in his poem "The Rhime of Ancient Mariner" are very appropriate: "Water, water everywhere, Not any drop to drink". Out of 3 per cent fresh water, two-thirds of it is locked up in the polar regions. What water is available, in lakes, rivers, aquifers (underground) and rainfall run-off, is coming under pressure from several directions, of which population pressure is the principal one.

The stark truth is that there is not enough fresh water and where there is, it being wasted, mismanaged and polluted on a grand scale. Experts say that between 1970 and 1990 available per capita water supply decreased by one third. At present 1.1 billion people lack access of clean water and 2.2 million children under five die each year due to contaminated water-borne diseases. A UN report in 1997 said that two-thirds of world population will be affected by water shortages by 2025.

A new study titled "World Water Assessment Programme" by an association of 23 agencies under the UNESCO has just been released on 5 March 2003, ahead of the Kyoto World Water Forum. It paints a pessimistic outlook on water problems indicating that while world's population would surge in the next two decades, the availability of fresh water would shrink and many of the countries that would face a water crunch are located in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

The world's population, 6.3 billion, is growing by more than 90 million a year and the growth

is concentrated in developing countries. According to the UN revised estimate of World's Population Prospects released in February 2003, Bangladesh's population will grow to 254 million by 2050 and it will be the 7th populous country in the world, after India, (1.5 billion), China (1.3 billion), US (408.7 million), Pakistan (348.7 million), Indonesia (293.8 million) and Nigeria (258.5 million). The World Bank President Wolfensohn said that "in the next 25 years there will be 2 billion more people coming into this world but virtually all of that 2 billion goes to developing countries."

Agriculture and industry consume water and irrigating crops in tropical countries accounts for 70 per cent of all water use in the world. Pollution from industry and agriculture and human waste has further exacerbated the problem. It is reported that about two million tons of waste are dumped every day into rivers, lakes and streams. One litre of waste water is sufficient to pollute about eight litres of fresh water.

Furthermore climate change is likely to adversely affect precipitation and UN experts calculate that it will probably account for about a fifth of the increase in water scarcity. Rainfall in warmer countries is predicted to decrease and as a result water quality will worsen. The increasing demand for water for irrigation has prompted the building of dams and barrages on the rivers. It is reported that the flows of about 60 per cent of the world's largest rivers have been interrupted by dams and this has caused increasing environmental stress.

Another fact that merits attention is the increasing urbanisation of the world's population. At present it is reported that 48 per cent of the world's population lives in towns and cities and this will be 60 per cent by 2030. In

developing countries rapid urbanisation creates slums and the problem is unsanitary conditions including unsatisfactory disposal of human wastes. As the 5th March UN Study states: "Where good waste management is lacking urban areas are among the world's most life-threatening environments".

Nearly all large rivers of the world flow through more than one country. The Ganges flows through Nepal, India and Bangladesh. Mekong river passes through China, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Nile flows through Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt and the head waters of Tigris and Euphrates that passes through Syria and Iraq are located in Turkey. Israel depends on Syria and Jordan for water and now controls 80 per cent of Palestinian aquifers (underground water) in the occupied territory.

As the demand for fresh water increases conflict of interests is likely to rise between upper and lower riparian countries as to how to equitably share water of common rivers for consumptive use. Although there are 200 treaties now in existence for the management of shared water resources, there were 37 instances where conflicts erupted including 18 of those between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The Director of the UN World Assessment Programme Gordon Young reportedly said that the growing pressure of population in countries of upper reaches of rivers would put severe strain on supplies to downstream users such as Egypt and Iraq and may give rise to potential conflicts.

The UN study points out that by middle of the century 7 billion people in 60 countries may be faced with water scarcity. Scarcity of water in developing countries means hunger, disease and death. Despite widely available evidence of water crisis in the years ahead, the study says that "

political commitment to reverse these trends has been lacking".

At Kyoto, this month the World Water Forum will focus on the unprecedented height of water crisis and will argue for world leaders to fight their political inertia over water issue and come to grips to avoid catastrophic potential in the next few decades by introducing right water policies in the regions all over the world. It may not be now realised that water may be the century's most serious crisis. But political leaders should not turn a blind eye to the water crisis as disease and death will result from a drastically declining water supply in the years ahead.

In the Bangladesh context, water sharing of all 56 common rivers with India is a priority. India has been building dams in many of the common rivers and it is reported that it has built 100 dams on common rivers for the purpose of withdrawing waters upstream. Of these, six dams along the Bangladesh border are believed to be causing great injury to Bangladesh. Furthermore because of lack of joint management of common rivers between the two, Bangladesh, being the lower riparian country, is likely to be adversely affected by gradual diversion of waters in India in the coming decades. At one stage in the late 70s and 80s, Bangladesh proposed to build reservoirs in India and the Himalayan range of Nepal to store monsoon waters. This was so that in the dry season India, Nepal and Bangladesh could have access to stored water. The proposal never went anywhere. Currently, it appears that the rain water during monsoon season is allowed to run-off to Bay of Bengal without being properly utilised.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

Freedom for rice twice a day

I adore rice
I dote on rice
I vote for rice
I voted for rice
I am devoted to rice.

The ruling party came to power
On a manifesto of lentil and rice,
Dal and bhat,
Though others promised fish and rice,
Machh and bhat.

For me my mother's wish forever milk and rice
Doodh and bhat.

They say bhate-bhate, just rice in rice
No oil or spice:
A snappy little recipe
That makes one so happy.

Rice is nearly as good as God.
It may be a little less than God.
Me without rice, God looks odd and dour
And all His glorious names get so sour,

I adore rice
I dote on rice
I vote for rice
I voted for rice
I am devoted to rice

I wish for rice everyday
I dream for rice everyday
In rice there is a little gusto
More than the Communist Manifesto
Of eighteen forty eight
For a nice bowl of rice
It's more important to fight

In this age of technology information
I give my left thumb impression
On the sharecropping deed
It's pity I can't write or read
On a rare occasion my grievances I can voice,
And on rarer occasion some time I do rejoice.

I do not know what four freedoms are
I have not heard of either
Four square meals or four sandwiches a day
I am more than happy if I get rice,
Not thrice,
Just twice a day.

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of Caretaker Government