

## **Water Could Be Source of Future Conflicts**

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Future conflicts could arise over control of the shared river basins on which millions of people depend for drinking water, irrigation and energy suggests a report released by the United Nations last week. The report, presented last Wednesday to experts at the World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan, said water may be the source of the world's next big conflicts if nations don't start co-operating to share their resources.

It was one of two major reports presented to the forum that addressed the issue of water and security. The Atlas of International Freshwater Agreements found agreements do not exist for 153 of the 263 river basins that cross or delineate international boundaries. These basins are shared by over 145 countries and represent 60 per cent of the world's fresh water. Without diplomatic action, these basins could become flash points for conflict over water rights, the report suggests.

Klaus Toepfer, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, told attendees at the forum the report "is both cause for alarm and cause for optimism." A second report, entitled Water for People - Water for Life, was presented to the forum on Saturday to mark World Water Day. Slobodan Simonovic, a leading expert in water management and a professor of engineering at the University of Western Ontario, led the team who prepared the section on water related conflicts. "The 21st century is the water century," said Simonovic. "Hope for the future lies in co-operative international action directed to counter numerous water problems exaggerated by the climate variability and change."

Although much of the focus is on water in less developed countries, Canadians are also vulnerable to water issues, Simonovic said. "Canada has more water than most nations. However, changes in water availability in terms of quantity and quality greatly affect Canadian life. Canada and the world need to take action now and invest in waste water treatment," he said.

The third World Water Forum, which concluded on Sunday, gathered over 24,000 participants from 182 countries to discuss water issues from governance to financing

to flood management. One of the themes of the forum was the importance of water in maintaining peace and security. The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater. Among the other findings of the Water for People - Water for Life report:

- 1.1 billion people lack access to safe water and 2.4 billion lack access to adequate sanitation
- More than 6,000 children die every day from diseases associated with unsafe water, and unsafe water and sanitation causes an estimated 80 per cent of all diseases in the developing world
- Water use has grown at twice the rate of the population during the past century
- As much as 90 per cent of wastewater is discharged without treatment in developing countries.

One flush of a Western toilet uses as much water as the average person in the developing world uses for a whole day for washing, drinking, cleaning and cooking.