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A U.N. Treaty on the Human Right to Water?

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By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS -- The United Nations has warned that by 2025, about 1.8 billion people will live in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity.

If that's the gloomy scenario, says Kathryn Mulvey, executive director of Corporate Accountability International, then the upcoming U.N. Millennium Summit should explore the potential for an international treaty to protect the human right to water.

"What measures can the U.N. summit take to ensure that two-thirds of the world's population (of over six billion) will have enough access to water by 2015?" she asked.

"It is imperative we bring people together to protect the human right to water, and to resist the corporate commodification of something so essential to human life," Mulvey told IPS.

She said that water should be freely available as a human right but it is becoming increasingly scarce because big business is stepping in and turning water into a profit-driven industry, inflating the price of water beyond the reach of those who need it most.

The summit, which is to be attended by over 170 world leaders and scheduled to take place Sep. 14-16, is expected to review the progress made in relation to the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the U.N. General Assembly back in September 2000. The deadline to reach the goals is 2015.

But most of the MDGs, including poverty reduction, the elimination of hunger and disease, universal primary education, and the provision of clean water and sanitation, are predicted to remain unfulfilled by the 2015 deadline -- at least at the current rate of progress.

"In just over two decades, more than two-thirds of the world's people will not have enough access to enough water. Meanwhile, supplying water has become a 400 billion dollar growth industry," Mulvey said.

But instead of helping to alleviate the world's water supply problems, the private water industry has been characterised by price-gouging and other forms of corporate corruption that have contributed to cities and even entire countries spiraling into crisis, she pointed out.

Mulvey said that ongoing water privatisation by corporations like Suez, and expansion of bottled water markets by corporations like Coca-Cola, are clearly contributing to the world's water problems.

She said that these big corporations wield enormous political and financial clout with governments and regulatory agencies around the world.

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"In order to move toward ensuring people's access to water, we must first expose and challenge the irresponsible and dangerous actions of corporations like Suez and Coke," she added.

Roberto Lenton, chair of the Geneva-based Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), said the issue of water privatisation has many dimensions.

"But it is much less of an issue, and it not a significant factor, vis-a-vis the MDGs," he added. Lenton said the private sector is involved mostly in middle income countries, not in the world's poorer nations.

"And if you look at the investments of the private sector in water and sanitation, they have declined in recent years because of concerns about risks," Lenton told IPS.

In an op-ed piece in the New York Times last month, Tom Standage, author of "A History of the World in Six Glasses", pointed out that most people cannot tell the difference between tap water and bottled water. "Yet, they buy it anyway -- and in enormous quantities," he wrote.

This year alone, U.S. citizens are expected to spend some 9.8 billion dollars on bottled water, according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation.

"Ounce for ounce, it costs more than gasoline, even at today's prices: depending on the brand, it costs 250 to 10,000 times more than tap water," wrote Standage, who is also the technology editor of the British magazine, the Economist.

Writing in the London Financial Times last month, Hans Engelberts, general secretary of Public Services International in France, said that almost all serious water experts accept the fact that the 15-year experiment with privatisation has failed to deliver water to the poor.

"Even the World Bank regularly admits that its water privatisation policies have been unsuccessful," he added.

Engelberts said the failure was not due to opposition from public sector unions, western anti-government non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or occasional local protesters, but to the problems involved in trying to make profits delivering water to the poor.

"To state the obvious, one characteristic of the poor is having little money. The big water companies have found that they are unable to extract enough, even with World Bank loans and government guarantees," he added.

"I have always been of the view that a resource cannot be privatised because it is the property of nations and peoples. Water as a resource is for the development of the people in that region," said Gourisankar Ghosh, executive director of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council.

He argued that the private sector has to be brought in for better management and better efficiency -- particularly in downstream distribution of water. "But certainly, the regulatory control of the resource should still be in the hands of the government," Ghosh told IPS.

Asked if the poor have to pay a price for water, he said: "The answer is yes and no."

Everyone should know that water has a price, he said, but the government has to decide that if the poorest of the poor cannot pay, then it can implement a subsidy programme. "We call it intelligent targeting of subsidy to the poor."

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But if you have indiscriminatory subsidies, the benefits would go more to the rich than the poor, he warned.

Sunita Narain, director of the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment, dismissed the issue as an "an irrelevant debate".

She said it is a debate in which most people do not grasp the realities. "Let's be very clear: we do need cleaner water. We have public utilities today who are unable to manage. But why are public utilities not able to manage? Because nobody is prepared to pay for the water," Narain told IPS.

She said the World Bank insists on full-cost pricing. But in India, it cannot happen both politically and financially. The technology is too expensive to charge the people the full cost of delivering water.

"In that scenario, what does privatisation mean? It means you will have a private company who will come only to service the rich and not the poor, because only the rich can afford to pay," she added.

Narain said privatisation is already happening in India, because "if you come to Delhi, the only water you drink is bottled water".

She said that instead of getting water through a tap, people are getting the same water in a bottle. "And it is private. So, the rich have already opted out of the public system. They are now dependent on private water supplies."

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