

400 Million Children Deprived of Safe Water

On Eve of World Water Day, Children Deliver Urgent Call for Change

MEXICO CITY/NEW YORK, 21 March 2006 - As world leaders gather to discuss solutions to the global water crisis, a landmark meeting of children called for urgent help for 400 million children struggling to survive without safe water.

The call to action was delivered to government ministers by young participants in the Children's World Water Forum (CWWF), at the close of the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico City.

More than 100 child water activists from the world's poorest countries and industrialised nations attended the CWWF, a unique platform for children's views and voices on water.

"Waterborne illness kills a child every fifteen seconds and underlies much of the world's disease and malnutrition," UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. VENEMAN said in New York. "Solutions to the world water crisis must ensure that children survive, thrive, learn and live in dignity."

The CWWF was co-organized by UNICEF, the Mexican Institute of Water Technology, the Japan Water Forum and the U.S.-based water organisation Project WET. Many of the young people participating in the forum have overcome great odds to improve water and hygiene conditions in their own communities, where safe water is a priceless luxury.

"Where I live, many children are out of school because of diseases they catch from their drinking water or from their unwashed hands," said Dolly AKHTER, a 16 year-old hygiene educator from a Bangladesh slum. "We are here to remind leaders that they must act to protect our health and education. It is our right and their responsibility."

Children pay the highest price for an unhygienic world where over 1 billion people struggle without safe water and a staggering one in three lacks even a basic toilet. Ordinary diarrhoea sickens more children under five than any other illness, killing 4,500 children every day (the second highest single cause of child deaths) and pushing many times that number to the very brink of survival.

Major social needs such as education are closely linked to safe water and hygiene. Waterborne diseases sap children's energy and ability to learn. Every day, a large number of children in developing countries are missing school because of diseases like diarrhoea and intestinal worms. And without decent, private sanitation facilities at school, many girls find attendance impossible.

A child growing up in these conditions has little chance of escaping poverty, VENEMAN said. Human potential is drained out of poor communities by constant death and disease. Chronic under-development is the inevitable result. It is estimated that days missed at work or school translate into approximately \$63 billion in lost global productivity every year.

UNICEF is sponsoring young people from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America to bring their stories of courage against water and sanitation deprivation to the CWWF; stories like Dolly AKHTER's hygiene education programme in a Bangladesh slum, teaching local schoolchildren how to keep their hands and homes clean, and 11 year-old Ojulo OKELLO's struggle in the wake of Ethiopia's civil strife to bring toilets and safe water to his school. These children and 13,000 others are being asked to share their experiences on UNICEF's Voices of Youth interactive website.

Different regions, different water challenges the children's stories reflect the wide range of water challenges facing their native regions.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, decades of conflict, poor land management and the grip of this latest vicious drought in the southern half of the continent has left most children facing a desperate water shortage. Over 42 per cent of the population has no access to safe water and only 36 per cent have a toilet. This region is the only one lagging on both its water and sanitation development goals.

In South and East Asia sanitation is the big issue. Over half of all people without toilets live in India and China – 1.5 billion in total – creating an environment polluted with human waste. Water quality is another significant and growing threat to the region's children. Dangerous contaminants in the groundwater such as arsenic and fluoride are now putting the health of 50 million people at serious risk.

In Central and Eastern Europe, water reserves are shrinking in the wake of environmental change, and national water systems are struggling to cope. With severe imbalances in access and a lack of regional co-operation to manage the existing water resources, the poorest children are being left far behind.

In Latin America, there are extreme inequalities in water and sanitation services both between and within countries. Children in rural areas are far worse off for water and sanitation services than children in cities. Across the region, poverty and social exclusion mean that indigenous and minority groups are disproportionately denied their rights to these services.

VENEMAN said World Water Day (22 March) is a chance to measure our progress towards the global pledge to halve the proportion of people without safe water and basic sanitation by 2015 – the seventh Millennium Development Goal. Keeping this promise means making children the focus of national water planning

and policies, bringing the swiftest improvements in overall national health and education rates. UNICEF and water: Since the 1960s, UNICEF has been on the ground delivering safe water, sanitation and hygiene education to children in over 90 countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas, to help them survive and thrive. Whether drilling handpump wells in Haiti, building latrines for Ethiopian schoolgirls, improving water quality in India, or trucking water to disaster zones in Pakistan and Indonesia, UNICEF is on the frontline of the drive to bring these basic life essentials to families. UNICEF is the world's leading supplier of Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS), a simple combination of salts and sugars proven to drastically reduce diarrhoea-related deaths. When emergencies strike, UNICEF leads the United Nations drive to protect children against waterborne diseases.

More information on water and sanitation projects can be found at www.unicef.org/wes/index.html. Broadcast quality footage is also available from www.thenewsmarket.com/unicef

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