

# Clean Water as a Human Right

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Access to clean water would be enshrined in international law as a human right, if a campaign by the water charity Green Cross International bears fruit.

The charity was founded by Mikhail Gorbachev, the former president of the Soviet Union, who wrote to the United Nations and national governments around the world to press them to support his campaign for the UN to adopt a convention on fresh water similar to that on human rights.

So far, not enough governments have thrown their weight behind the campaign to give it a chance of succeeding. But Green Cross International will continue to press its case, assisted by continuing research into water availability, which suggests that water crises are becoming more common around the world and could cause problems far beyond the borders of countries traditionally thought of as arid.

Mr. Gorbachev, in an interview with the Financial Times newspaper earlier this year, warned that water scarcity was becoming a source of "severe conflict." Citing examples such as the Middle East, and areas of northern and southern Africa where water access has been fought over, he said, "People, when they lack water, will stop at nothing to get water." The former Soviet leader's proposal would seek to reduce such tension by laying down firm principles on the management of rivers that cross international borders and shared river basins. He told the Financial Times: "Before, people thought water was available and would always be available, and the problem was not that severe. Now it is necessary to adopt a convention that would declare the right of access to good quality drinking water as a human right."

The convention proposed by Green Cross International would force governments to accept responsibility for providing their citizens with safe water and place obligations on them to manage their nation's water more responsibly. Mr. Gorbachev's UN reforms should expand the role of the Security Council beyond military security to economic and environmental safeguards, both of which strongly affect military security,

and warns that failure to act on environmental problems will lead to serious upheavals.

Mr. Gorbachev mused in the Financial Times: "I wonder whether we should wait to see waves of migration as a result of the lack of safe water, whether we want to see people take matters into their own hands to force politicians at different levels to address these issues."

The water situation is growing more desperate by the day. About one billion

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people lack access to clean water and two billion lack access to sanitation, with the problem being aggravated by the demands of increasing populations and economic growth. It takes 1,000 tons of water to produce a ton of grain. But the lack of clean water and basic sanitation that afflicts up to 40 per cent of the world's population knocks at least \$556 billion US (£317 billion, €458 billion) a year off the world's potential economic growth, according to the World Health Organization - equivalent to about one percent of global gross domestic product.

A further major driver of water shortages, which will become even more important in the future, is climate change. Global warming has started to shift rainfall patterns measurably, leading some areas to become drier and some wetter. These changes are not always obvious; recent research found that the Indian monsoon had changed, to a pattern whereby swathes of the country were receiving shorter heavier bursts of rainfall as opposed to the steady rain they received before. This is worse for farmers, because it can destroy their crops and cause flooding. But the change in the precipitation pattern had not been noted in previous studies because the overall amount of rain falling per year had remained steady.

Climate change itself is being seen as

a potential cause of future conflicts; the award of the Nobel peace prize this year to Al Gore, for his campaigning on the climate, and to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a body of the world's leading scientists convened by the UN, made this explicit.

Climate change was brought before the United Nations Security Council for the first time in April by the UK government. Margaret Beckett, then British foreign minister, labeled the issue one of the key factors behind the conflict in Darfur, because desertification had forced people from their traditional homes and into areas where they competed with others for scarce resources such as water. Around the same time, a group of 11 influential retired US generals produced a report on the military implications of climate change, warning it could prolong the war on terrorism and foster political instability that some governments would be unable to handle.

In the most comprehensive survey of climate change science yet produced, the IPCC warned earlier this year that global warming would cause widespread food shortages in the developing world. Other destabilizing results would include increased flooding, particularly in Asia, as well as fiercer storms and prolonged droughts.

As well as taking water and climate change to the UN in hopes of a solution, some economists have suggested that paying people to maintain watercourses and forests could be the best way to resolve the world's water crisis. A report last year by the World Conservation Union found that introducing fair water markets, under which poor communities would be paid for preserving the natural landscapes that are essential to maintaining water supplies, would reduce water scarcity.

Many of the natural features that are essential to the water cycle are damaged by poor people needing to make a living. Wetlands are drained, watersheds damaged by agriculture, and forests are cut down for timber. The effects are then felt in flooding, a reduction of water flow, or the contamination of water. But if local

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## Fact Sheets

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**Global Arms Trade 2004** examines the world's supplies of conventional weapons and small arms. Check out the numbers at <http://www.epsusa.org/publications/factsheets/globalarmstrade.pdf>.

**Military vs. Social Spending: Warfare or Human Welfare** compares US and global military spending with the costs of achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals. Visit <http://www.epsusa.org/publications/factsheets/milexMDG.pdf>.

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people were paid to maintain these land-scapes, water supplies would be protected, and the true cost of maintaining supplies could be reflected in higher water bills. Those bills are themselves the cause of controversy: poor people not only pay more for their water in developing countries, but sometimes effectively end up subsidizing better water services to the rich. Another possibility that could help defuse conflict is a forum in which the management of water basins which are shared between nations.

Areas of the world that have been pinpointed as the potential flashpoints for conflicts over water include the Middle East, where Israel and the Palestinian territories, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan all have rights to the Jordan River, on which they rely for agriculture, drinking and sanitation. Other danger spots include those around the Nile,

Niger and Zambezi rivers in Africa and Syria's dispute with Turkey over the damming by Ankara of the Tigris and Euphrates. Even in areas where there is no prospect of violence, nations suffering shortages - the "water stressed" in the jargon - are paying the price in lost productivity and stunted growth.

Water is, of course, a renewable resource: it falls as rain all over the world. But our increasing demands of our water supplies, and problems such as climate change and pollution which are curtailing the amount of water available, mean that we need to find some technical solutions to increase our water supply, too.

Desalination is one option for creating fresh water from the sea but it remains very expensive and requires large amounts of energy, which gives rise to greenhouse gas emissions if it comes from fossil fuel power stations.

Other low-tech solutions to our water shortages may in the end turn out be more valuable. For instance, much of the water currently used for irrigation is wasted. Farmers can be taught better techniques that will require less water for irrigation and conserve what water there is. Businesses that are heavy users of water, from food processing to silicon chip manufacturing, can also be taught to recycle their water. Households can be fitted with equipment to cut down their water use. Sewage can even be recycled to fresh water, using simple technologies now available.

If we were to use our available water to the maximum efficiency, many areas of the world that are now water stressed would be less so. And if we assisted poor countries to gain access to better sanitation, they would suffer less of an economic handicap.

