



United Nations Environment Programme

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ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

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STATEMENT

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

DELIVERED BY

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Chair, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to be able to continue the tradition of UNEP addressing the annual Health and Environment conference organized by World Information Transfer. The conferences have a solid reputation for raising awareness and fostering fruitful deliberations on the important inter-linkages between human health and the health of our environment. The theme of this year's conference, *Water and Health: Problems and Solutions*, is particularly pertinent in this the International Year of Freshwater. I will be concentrating my remarks on UNEP's perception of the problems, and providing some examples of the solutions that the organization is advocating with regard to water and health, in order to meet the commitments made by the international community in this field, including those outlined in the UN Millennium Declaration and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD).

Distinguished Chair,

Human and ecosystem health are both fundamentally dependent on the availability and quality of water. As the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pointedly stressed in a message to the recent third World Water Forum held in Japan, "Freshwater is essential for healthy ecosystems, sustainable development and human survival itself". Water is an essential ingredient in most crucial aspects of life, from the health of children to the ability to grow crops to sustain growing populations. As the recently released World Water Development Report concluded, "of all the social and natural crises we humans face, the water crisis is the one that lies at the heart of our survival and that of our planet".

Yet all over the world, freshwater is running dry and turning dirty. Pollution, over-consumption and poor water management are decreasing both the quality and quantity of available water. More than 1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water. About 2.4 billion people - a third of the planet's population - lack access to adequate sanitation. This robs people of health, dignity and opportunities. The cost is widespread suffering and millions of avoidable deaths each year. Consider that a child dies from a preventable waterborne illness about once every 10 seconds, or that water and sanitation issues are at the forefront of humanitarian needs in times of crisis, as we are witnessing in Iraq.

The urgency of the water crisis was underlined by the declaration by the United Nations of 2003 as the International Year of Fresh Water, and reflected in the more than 100 new commitments towards bringing safe water and sanitation to the world made by delegates to the third World Water Forum, held in the three neighboring Japanese cities of Kyoto, Shiga and Osaka from March 16 through 23, 2003. Key issues revolved around balancing increasing human requirements for adequate water supplies and better health and sanitation with food production, transportation, energy and environmental needs. During the Forum, UNEP took the lead in organizing this year's World Day for Water, with the theme 'Water for the Future', which aimed to inspire political and community action and encourage greater global understanding of the need for more responsible water

use and conservation. UNEP will also highlight water during World Environment Day on 5 June, with the motto, 'Water: Two Billion People are Dying for It'. World Environment Day will be celebrated in Beirut, Lebanon this year, in a region where water resources are vitally important, in social, economic and political terms.

The international community, in both the Millennium Declaration and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, underlined that the global water crisis is a threat to economic development, poverty reduction and the environment and hence to peace. It also recognized that the provision of clean drinking water and adequate sanitation is necessary to protect human health and environment. Good water management will be essential to achieving most, if not all, of the Millennium Development Goals. Integrated water resource management will be especially key to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, ensuring environmental sustainability and improving health conditions. The centrality of the water issue to sustainable development was also one of the reasons why it was identified by the Secretary-General prior to WSSD as one of the so-called 'WEHAB' priority areas for action.

At WSSD governments supported the integrated regional and national management of river basins, watersheds, groundwater and other water resources, and made a commitment to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Achieving these goals demands a concerted effort involving a wide variety of partners as well as an intersectoral approach, which recognizes the links between diverse and sometimes competing interest. It also needs an international perspective, since many water resources are shared among nations. UNEP's water strategy combines assessment, management and coordination of actions to provide an integrated, comprehensive and dynamic approach to water issues. For example, the findings of the Global International Waters Assessment (GIWA) feed into initiatives like the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from land-Based Activities (GPA), which is largely implemented through a network of UNEP-supported Regional Seas agreements. UNEP has also revitalized its GEMS/Water programme, headquartered in Canada, which is monitoring, assessing, and building capacity in 69 countries.

Underlying UNEP's strategy is the fair share of water resources, for agriculture, industry, and domestic use; for the poor, who have to pay proportionately more for scarce resources, both in terms of money and labour; and for the environment, whose threatened forests, lakes, wetlands, and coastal swamps are the foundation for the future availability of the Earth's most precious resource.

Last November, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights pronounced that, "water is fundamental for life and health. The human right to water is indispensable for leading a healthy life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of all other human rights." Beyond personal and domestic needs, water is necessary for realizing the rights to adequate food, health and housing. Safe water is especially necessary to reduce the risk of water-related disease, where the burden of disease being borne disproportionately by children. The biggest cause of water pollution in developing countries is sewage and its most damaging effect is on human health.

Diseases directly influenced by hygiene, sanitation and water include, infectious diarrhoea, typhoid, cholera, hepatitis, malaria, trachoma, fluorosis, and other debilitating diseases such as schistosomiasis or Japanese encephalitis. Access to clean water and improvements in sanitation and hygiene behaviours may reduce the incidence of many such diseases, while better water resources management in both agricultural and urban settings can help control malaria and other water-related vector-borne diseases.

Other linkages between water and health are more indirect, such as those related to water as a means of producing food and of protecting the environment. In addition to reducing the incidence of disease, improved water management has other beneficial effects on health, such as decreased expenditure arising from water related disease; and increased time available for productive and non-productive activity, especially by children and women, due to improved access to drinking water.

Many women in the developing world spend large parts of their day carrying water from streams and rivers that are often polluted. A new UNEP initiative recognizes that women rarely own or control environmental resources – especially water – and that they need more time for productive work. The project ‘Empowering Women in Rainwater Harvesting in Kenya’, in partnership with Earthcare Africa Monitoring Institute, was designed to enhance women’s participation in decisions about water and its management. The project is providing rainwater harvesting and sanitation facilities to Masai communities in Kenya and is managed by women. It will be a blueprint for similar projects in dry areas in Africa and elsewhere.

In our environmental health related work, water and health issues also feature prominently. For example, household water quality and availability; hygiene and sanitation; and disease vectors (e.g. malaria-transmitting mosquitoes) are among the priority areas for the WHO-led ‘Healthy Environments for Children Alliance’ (HECA), a “type II” partnership launched at WSSD, in which UNEP is a core partner. HECA is being developed into a world-wide alliance to intensify global action on environmental risks to children’s health that arise from the settings where they live, learn, play and earn, by providing knowledge, increasing political will, mobilizing resources, and catalyzing action.

Distinguished Chair, I will end with a much coined phrase, which sums up the relationship between water and health, namely that ‘water is life’ – but which perhaps does not adequately convey the urgency of the water crisis – our challenge is not only to recognize that urgency, but to tackle it head on.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this conference.