

# On the Threshold of a Global Water Crisis

## The right to water offers a solution

Maude Barlow's speech to the Water Rights conference in Mexico City, March 2006

**We are living in a period of history when the common heritage of humanity and the earth is under systemic siege. Under the current model of globalization, everything is for sale. Areas once considered our common heritage are being commodified, commercialized and privatized at an alarming rate. The assault on, and defence of, the commons is one of the great ideological and social struggles of our times.**

Nothing dramatizes the crisis of the commons more clearly than freshwater. Water is a sacred component of the commons; it belongs to our common humanity, the earth and all living species. It is, therefore, a fundamental human right and a public good that must be protected by governments and communities, not a human need to be supplied by the market on the basis of wealth.



Today, we are on the threshold of a global water crisis. Right now, approximately one third of the world's population is suffering from water scarcity. Every eight seconds, somewhere in the world, a child dies of water-borne disease. If current trends continue, two thirds of the people on the planet will not have adequate access to clean water by the year 2025. As we massively pollute the world's surface waters, we are mining groundwater far faster than nature can replenish it. The twin realities of growing freshwater shortages, combined with deeply inequitable access, pose the greatest ecological and human rights threats of our time.

It would be hard to exaggerate this crisis. Recent studies

report major deterioration in all of Africa's 677 major lakes, which the UN predicts could be reduced to swamps in the next two decades. Twenty-two countries in Africa are currently experiencing severe water crises. Water-borne killers such as malaria, typhoid, cholera and even the plague have returned to Africa.

Asia will soon face "untold anarchy" says a British team of scientists, as it depletes its underground supplies of water. The *New Scientist* recently reported on the "little heralded crisis" in Asia caused by many millions of high-tech drilling pumps threatening to "suck the continent dry." Water tables are plummeting in Vietnam, Pakistan and India, where desperate farmers are over-mining groundwater, unable to use the 75 percent of surface

waters so polluted they are unfit for human use. Ninety percent of the groundwater under China's cities is contaminated. Seven hundred million Chinese people drink polluted water every day. Almost every country in the Middle East is facing a water crisis of historic proportion.

Mexico now depends on groundwater mining for three quarters of its water needs as massive pollution is destroying surface waters.

The highly toxic waters along the Mexican/US border are now referred to as a "3,400 kilometer Love Canal" and a human-induced desert is spreading over much of the Mexican Valley. Mexico City is sinking in on itself as it drains the last of its local accessible aquifers and is moving far beyond its geographic borders in a desperate search for new water supplies. (Once the "Venice" of the new world, the abundant water sources where the city now stands were destroyed by the conquering Spanish who used slave labour to dredge the canals and drain the lakes.)

Tragically, in its drive to supply water to its burgeoning population (a result of NAFTA policies that have driven

millions of farmers and peasants off their lands), authorities have confiscated ancient water rights from the Mazahuas and other indigenous peoples in rural Mexico, creating a secondary crisis for millions. Especially hard hit are women who must walk farther and farther every day to find water for their families, and indigenous farmers forced to try to catch the rain from the skies to plant the food they need for survival. This theft of local water supplies is a direct violation of the human rights of the Mazahuas and other indigenous peoples around the world who are often at the mercy of powerful forces beyond their borders.

South America, with its abundant supplies of water, should be able to provide its people with all the water they need. South

America holds vast stores of water; the Amazon Basin alone holds 20% of the world's freshwater supplies. As a result, each person should have access to 110,000 cubic feet of water per year. Instead, Latin Americans have one of the lowest per capita annual allocations – just 1,010 – or less than one per cent of their due. More than 130 million have no access to safe drinking water in their homes and only 86

million – less than one-third of the population – are connected to adequate sanitation. The reasons: massive pollution of surface waters; deep inequities between rich and poor; and the growing private ownership of water, which denies water to those who cannot pay.

And everywhere, ecosystems and other species are crashing as the lifeblood of the planet is being destroyed.

If ever there was a moment for humanity to put aside its differences and come together to embark on a mighty crusade to save the world's water, it is now. In fact it is too late to panic. It is time to act for our collective survival.

Yet, tragically, many of the world's most powerful eco-

nomics and political elites do not believe that the world's dwindling freshwater stocks are the collective heritage of humanity, but a kind of "Blue Gold" which is theirs to plunder. "Water hunters" are scouring the planet for new sources of water. Last year, bottling companies put close to 170 billion liters of fresh water into plastic bottles, creating a massive new source of pollution. If only half of the US\$100 billion that the world's wealthy spent on bottled water in 2005 had been spent on infrastructure and treatment, every human being in the world would have clean drinking water today.

Other transnational water corporations – the largest of which are among the wealthiest corporations on the planet – are wresting control from local governments to

deliver water on a for-profit basis to those who can pay, and denying it to those who cannot. Not content to run the once public utilities for their private profit, some are now buying whole river systems, controlling and even denying vital water supplies to untold millions.

This has given rise to a mighty contest. On one side: the global water industry, composed of for-profit water service companies and bottled water giants; international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, who have made the privatization of water a conditionality of their loans to Third World countries in the global South; the World Trade Organization, which protects the interests of the water companies through legally binding enforcement measures; and many First World governments, who are promoting the interests of their private corporations over the needs and rights of the world's people.

These interests came together almost a decade ago to form the World Water Council, which is sponsoring the 4<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum here in Mexico City later this week. The mandate of the World Water Council is to promote a privatized and commodified future for the



world's water. It views water as a commodity similar to oil and gas, and is setting the stage for the world's water to be controlled by a powerful global water cartel similar to the world's energy cartel. In its previous forums, the WWC has set out to convince governments that there is a global consensus on a private future for the world's dwindling freshwater supplies and has consistently refused to consider water as a basic human right. This is not a semantic issue; you cannot trade or sell a fundamental right and those who would profit from water know it.

Mexicans may want to ask themselves, then, at a time when the water crisis is growing in this country, why President Fox invited the World Water Council to hold its forum here. Is this a signal to the Mexican people that Vicente Fox has plans to officially welcome the corporate water cartel - already moving into many Mexican communities - into this country? Just how friendly is the former vice-president of Coca Cola with the water barons? Is Mexico's water safe from corporate threat or, as I suspect, on the bargaining table right now?

***“You cannot trade or sell a fundamental right and those who would profit from water know it.”***

On the other side: a powerful new international grassroots movement made up of small farmers, indigenous peoples, human rights activists, environmentalists, women's groups, and the inhabitants of thousands of communities around the world fighting for the right to control their local water sources.

These include the residents of Orange Farm, South Africa, who oppose the installation of expensive water meters in their newly delivered water pipes; the tribal communities of Plachimada, India, who are standing up to a global bottling company draining their local water sources; the indigenous peoples of El Alto, Bolivia, as they fight the theft of their mountain water streams by a service transnational; and, bursting with pride, the citizens of Uruguay who last year became the first in the world to successfully vote for a “right to water” referendum in their national election.

It also includes a powerful and growing right to water movement here in Mexico; later this week, COMDA (Coalicien de Organizaciones Mexicanas por el Dereche al Agua) will sponsor the International Forum in the Defense of Water, with water-rights activists from all over the Americas and around the world.

These groups and many, many others, have formed a global resistance to the corporate theft of their water and are leading the way to a water-secure world based on four fundamental principles:

*water commons* – that water belongs to the earth and all species and must be understood for all time to be a universal common trust;

*water justice* – that water is a fundamental human right to be distributed equitably as a public service and never appropriated for profit;

*water stewardship* – that water must be conserved and renewed, rather than wasted, contaminated and depleted, and that humanity must once again respect water's sacred place within the natural world; and

*water democracy* – that water management decisions must involve local community participation because local stewardship, not private business, expensive technology or government alone, is the best safeguard for a water-secure future.

To date, the global water justice movement and the larger global justice movement of which it is a part, has been mainly focused on building resistance to the corporate takeover of the world's water. But this water justice movement is committed to building alternatives as well as resistance. Instead of private-public-partnerships, which lead to the corporate takeover of our water systems, we advocate public-community-partnerships in which ownership, control and access with regards to this vital resource remains in the hands of people and their communities. Most important, we insist that an international treaty recognizing water as a human right and public good be ratified to ensure that governments carry out these obligations.

The omission of water from both the original United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has hampered the fight for water justice and has allowed private interests to determine the fate of the world's water. The process within the UN toward a more binding legal framework has already begun with the adoption of General Comment No. 15 – emphasizing the right to water as a cornerstone for all other human rights. Recently, the Commission on Human Rights has said it will seek a clear resolution on the right to water and will appoint a UN Special Rapporteur to guide the process.



The eventual goal of our coalition, called Friends of the Right to Water, is a full UN treaty guaranteeing clean water to every citizen on earth as a fundamental right.

As coalition member Bread For the World explains it, the human rights approach stresses above all the responsibilities of the state: the right to water entitles every individual to have access to adequate water and it is the state's obligation to do everything possible to realize this for everybody, without discrimination, and on a not-for-profit basis. Where states fail to carry out this duty, the human rights perspective makes it possible to hold them accountable for it. Access to adequate water thus is discussed not only as a moral, but also as a political and legal claim.

(As a Canadian, I must condemn in the strongest possible terms the fact that my government was the only one among fifty-three to vote against the human right to water at a key UN meeting in 2002. To the bafflement

of the entire development community in Canada, our government continues to take this outrageous position. Canada will remain a rogue nation in the international campaign for meaningful human rights as long as it maintains this perverse stance.)

The right to water is an idea whose time has come. We need the support of the governments and civil society groups here this morning to take this message into the 4<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum and back to our countries and communities and make it real. The world's water is in peril. The planet is weeping.

Eleanor Roosevelt once declared: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." Well I believe in the beauty of this dream: that the global water crisis will become the source of global peace; that humanity will bow before Nature and learn to cooperate with the limits that Nature gives us and with each other; that through our work together, the peoples of the world will declare the sacred waters of life to be the common property of the earth and all species, to be preserved for future generations and time immemorial.

**Maude Barlow** is the National Chairperson of The Council of Canadians, founder of the Blue Planet Project, and co-author of the international best-selling book *Blue Gold, The Fight to Stop Corporate Theft of the World's Water*.

*To learn more about the right to water, visit the Blue Planet Project website at [www.blueplanetproject.net](http://www.blueplanetproject.net)*