

# Forum on Water Security

The Second World Water Forum, held in The Hague from 17-22 March 2000, under the theme of "Guaranteeing Water Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," ended somewhat indecisively.

The Forum set out to address a crisis in the world's water supply, where it is estimated that one billion people are without an adequate supply of drinking water and two billion without adequate sanitation.

The event, which was chaired by Prince Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands, brought together more than 4,500 experts from all over the world, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and other interest groups.

The meeting ended with a two-day Ministerial Conference, at the close of which Ministers responsible for water management and the environment from 110 countries adopted a Declaration which, while recognising that access to sufficient water and sanitation are basic human needs, does not go so far as to propose a genuine global strategy for addressing the growing shortage of water in many of the world's poorest countries. Ministers were accused of failing to follow through key demands from delegates. The Chairman noted that the overwhelming majority of the 4,600 participants wanted recognition of water as a basic human right enshrined in the Ministerial Declaration.

The issues of privatisation and charging for water dominated discussions at both the Forum and the Ministerial Conference.

The Dutch co-operation minister, Eveline Herfkens, stated that the world will face significant shortages of water over the coming years and that leaders and the general public must be made aware of the urgent need to resolve the water crisis, just as the oil crisis in 1973 was successfully addressed.

She refuted criticism from environmental groups and their ultra-liberal stance taken at the Forum: these organisations argue that water cannot be reduced to a simple economic commodity but is a fundamental human right. The Minister insisted that charging for water distribution implies that its price should reflect its economic value. She believed that greater involvement of the private sector is an absolute necessity in increasing the efficiency of services and attracting the considerable capital required, which exceeds the resources of governments in this area.

## Ministerial Declaration

In the Declaration adopted on 22 March, Ministers pledged to guarantee access for all to safe and sufficient water at a reasonable price to ensure a healthy and productive life, and to protect the most vulnerable against risks linked to water. They acknowledge that pollution, unbridled use of resources, changes in land-use, climate change and many other factors threaten water resources and original ecosystems.

In order to combat the growing shortages – which, as Ministers indicated, most affect the poorest countries – it is essential that the true value of water be recognised.

To this end, they believe it is necessary to manage water in a manner that enhances its economic, social, environmental and cultural value, and to charge for water supply services on the basis of real costs. They emphasise, however, that this approach must reflect a need for fairness, whilst taking account of the poorest and most under-privileged.

The challenges are identified as: meeting basic needs (universal access to adequate supplies of safe water); securing food supply; protecting ecosystems; sharing water resources (peaceful co-operation and the development of synergies between different uses of water at all levels); managing risks (natural catastrophes and epidemiological problems); and valuing water and governing water wisely to ensure that the public and the interests of all stakeholders are included in the management of water resources.

Ministers recognise in this context the need for institutional, technological and financial innovations in order to meet these challenges. They also believe that the private sector has a role to play and advocate that integrated management of water resources should take account of all resources and all players.

However, there are no concrete proposals for a strategy or action plan. Ministers pledge to pursue collaboration and synergies in order to translate principles into action and outline targets and strategies to ensure the challenge of water security is met.

Ministers also agreed to meet periodically to review progress. Their next meeting is planned for 2002, in Bonn, Germany, in the context of the review of the implementation of Agenda 21, ten years after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). 