

# Life On a Thirsty Planet

*Will the struggle for water trigger the next war?*

PARIS, March 5 (AFP)

**W**ater, the stuff of life, has become the source of dangerous friction, with developing nations jousting over water supplies as their populations soar and their environment deteriorates.

Ministers at the upcoming World Water Forum, meeting in the Hague on March 21 and 22, will be asked to help defuse the tensions by endorsing the idea of an international mediator in cross-border water disputes.

"Worldwide, at least 214 rivers flow through two or more countries, but no enforceable law governs the allocation and use of international waters," Sandra Postel, a senior researcher for the US-based environmental group Worldwatch Institute, points out.

According to the World Commission on Water, a 20 percent increase in fresh water will be needed by 2025, when the world's population of six billion people is expected to have increased by three billion.

Ismail Serageldin, vice president of the World Bank, made an ominous prediction in 1995: "Many of the wars of this century were about oil — but the wars of the

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next century will be about water."

The biggest flashpoint is the Middle East, a region that is predominantly desert in climate, has a huge rate of population growth, shrinking aquifers and a seething tradition of strife.

Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria all draw water from the Jordan and Yarmuk rivers, while Jewish settlers and Palestinians on the West Bank are heavily dependent on the Yargon-Tannim aquifer and two others which lie under most of the area's disputed settlements.

In Gaza, the groundwater level is reportedly sinking by 15 to 20 centimeters (six to eight inches) a year, while its quality deteriorates due to encroaching seawater.

The Golan Heights, called the Middle East's "water tower," are a crucial point in peace talks between Israel and Syria, while any final Israeli pullout from Southern Lebanon may be influenced by the loss of water drawn from the Litani River.

In Turkey, the massive Southeastern Anatolian Project's dam system will have a major impact on the Tigres and Euphrates rivers, with untold consequences for Syria and Iraq downstream.

In Asia, the Ganges is crucial to India's massive population of nearly one billion, and that of Bangladesh, while five countries in Central Asia share two rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya.

They feed the Aral Sea, which

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***Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan are among eight thirsty countries drawing water from the Nile."***

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has lost half its area and three-quarters of its volume due to excessive river diversions for cotton production, stranding three million of the region's 55 million people on its dying banks.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are seeking solutions to the crisis, but no recognized treaty allocates the basin's water.

In Indochina, tension is rising along the Mekong, where dam projects in China and Laos and water diversions in Thailand will radically affect the river's ecological balance, to the probable detriment of Cambodia and

Vietnam.

Around 60 million people depend on the basin below the southern Chinese province of Yunnan, and saltwater intrusion is already a serious problem in the Mekong Delta.

According to the UN Environment Program (UNEP), the need for freshwater is greater in Africa than anywhere else in the world.

“Africa has 19 of the 25 countries in the world with the highest percentage of populations without access to safe drinking

water,” says the agency’s spokesman, Jorge Illneca.

Algeria and Tunisia are among the countries already suffering water stress, a term that applies to freshwater consumption that exceeds 10 percent of the available supply.

Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan are among eight thirsty countries drawing water from the Nile. Egypt’s population of 67 million is expected to breach the 100-million mark over the next three decades. UN and independent relief officials meanwhile fear up to eight million

Ethiopians may suffer hunger or starvation this year because of drought.

Farther south, UNEP has had some success mediating water disputes in the southern Zambezi River basin and in the Lake Chad basin, according to its executive director, Klaus Toepfer.

He hopes to transform UNEP into a global moderator and mediator on water conflicts, after convincing the governments of Bolivia and Peru to sign a treaty over the disputed Lake Titicaca.

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