

Kiribati must urgently address rights to safe water, sanitation – UN expert



Special Rapporteur Catarina de Albuquerque. UN Photo/JC McIlwaine

25 July 2012 –

An independent United Nations expert has called on the Government of Kiribati to urgently address the human rights to safe water and sanitation, which could help to tackle the high child mortality rate in the Pacific island nation.

“I was shocked by the child mortality rate in Kiribati, which is the highest in the Pacific,” [said](#) the Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque, who is currently on an official visit to the country.

“If the country seriously wants to reduce preventable deaths of children, then sanitation and hygiene are two vital issues to be addressed as a matter of urgency,” she added.

She noted in a news release that a large proportion of the population in Kiribati practises open defecation, which means that people use the sea and bushes as their toilets. This has serious implications for people’s health, as human waste spreads diseases.

This is particularly the case in overcrowded South Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati. “Inadequate waste water management systems for existing toilets, a lack of hand washing habits and open defecation result in an explosive combination leading to many preventable child deaths,” noted the release.

Ms. de Albuquerque said a first step to improve the situation is to explicitly assign responsibilities for sanitation to a Government department and to provide it with the necessary human and financial resources.

She added that the current water supply situation in the country is “unsustainable,” and requires urgent measures to ensure that all Kiribatians have access to a sufficient quantity of water for their personal and domestic uses.

“Every individual in Kiribati has the human right to access drinking water and adequate sanitation that is accessible, available, affordable, acceptable and safe.”

Among her recommendations is to increase the country’s rainwater harvesting and storage capacity, as well as to boost efforts to reserve the precious groundwater sources.

Independent experts, or special rapporteurs, are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

News Tracker: past stories on this issue

[Lack of resources threatens water and sanitation supplies in developing countries – UN](#)