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Press Conference

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PRESS CONFERENCE BY UN EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

TO LAUNCH WORLD WATER DEVELOPMENT REPORT

With pollution, global warming and surging population growth already raising the spectre of widespread water shortages in the not-to-distant future, a new report warns that, without worldwide efforts to boost investment in conservation and sustainable water management, people in many parts of the world faced the real possibility of life without reliable water-resource systems.

“The challenges are great, but unsustainable management of and inequitable access to water resources cannot continue — the risks of inaction are even greater,” William Cosgrove, Content Coordinator of the latest World Water Development report, *Water in a Changing World*, warned at a Headquarters press conference today. “It’s going to take leaders inside [the water development community] and outside working together” to raise awareness about the challenges and mould the programmes and policies to increase investment, change behaviours, and meet growing demands in a sustainable manner.

Compiled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and 25 other agencies, the report is issued triennially and this year will serve as the basis for discussions at the Fifth World Water Forum, to be held in Istanbul, Turkey, from 16-22 March.

Joining Mr. Cosgrove on the podium this morning was Richard Connor, one of the report’s authors, who highlighted some of the human activities squeezing the planet’s freshwater supplies, including rapid industrialization, rising living standards and changing diets, mainly in large developing countries and emerging economies. Continued waste and mismanagement, exacerbated by the tangible effects of climate change, was putting pressure on water resources in both rich and poor countries.

With demand for water never having been as great as it was today, and energy consumption expected to jump some 60 per cent in the next few years, both speakers

emphasized the extent to which current crises linked to last year's oil, food and commodity price spikes were linked to water.

Mr. Connor said the production of biofuel had also increased sharply in recent years, with significant impact on water demand. The report noted that, despite their potential to help reduce dependence on fossil energy, and given the technology currently available, biofuels were likely to place a disproportionate amount of pressure on biodiversity and the environment.

Mr. Cosgrove also cited migration and urbanization as key demographic trends that required careful monitoring. As of 2008, the planet's population had officially become one of city dwellers, rather than rural residents. As cities became more populated, therefore, waste, pollution and pressure on water resources would become more concentrated. Given those scenarios, the decisions that countries took now would have implications for all future water development resources. "We experts have been aware of these issues for a long time [...] our message is that leaders outside the 'water box' must recognize this too," he added, stressing that, in light of the importance of the water sector, spending on water-related activities must become a high priority for Government leaders.

Responding to questions, he noted that investment would be needed not only for new infrastructure, but also to refresh or rehabilitate outmoded or dilapidated existing infrastructure. Investments must be made to enhance capacities so that water could be better managed within the sector, especially in developing countries.

Mr. Connors added that natural disasters also greatly slowed down the development of water infrastructure, and many countries could not afford to meet all their infrastructure needs, especially during the current financial crisis. That was where official development assistance (ODA) came in.

Noting that monies targeted for water-resource management had never been very high -- averaging around 7 per cent, but declining -- he recalled that World Bank President Robert Zoellick had recently urged developed countries to dedicate 0.7 per cent of their respective economic stimulus packages to a "Vulnerability Fund" for developing countries.

Taking that proposal a step further, Mr. Cosgrove suggested today that those monies be targeted to water sectors, where they would pay huge dividends. In countries that were short of water, goods like grains were used to produce it. Trade mechanisms could help those countries immensely, and Governments should make the "big decisions" that would help them achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

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