



Arsenic crisis in South Asian water reaching "catastrophic" levels

Agence France Presse English
Sun 16 Mar 2003
Section: International News
Time: 12:31 GMT (08:31 Eastern Time)

KYOTO, Japan, March 16 (AFP) - Arsenic contamination of the water supply in India, Nepal and Bangladesh is afflicting more than 35 million people and if left unchecked, could reach "catastrophic" levels, a UN researcher warned Sunday.

Hoping to attract attention to a crisis he said is on a comparable scale with the global HIV problem, Zafar Adeel of the United Nations University in Japan said the infected populations could not wait the same 20 years for the international community to act.

"People need clean water to live," he said before convening a session at the Third World Water Forum here, which will gather some 10,000 delegates from 180 countries to find solutions to the crisis that deprives 1.4 billion people of adequate fresh water.

"Without international commitment to resolving the crisis, we could reach catastrophic levels in a very short time."

South Asia turned to groundwater when waterborne illness from polluted rivers made surface water a dangerous drink, causing thousands of casualties, mostly in children.

Massive reservoirs in the plains of the Indus and Ganges rivers were built, and the World Bank and UNICEF constructed thousands of wells to tap into groundwater sources. For every well built by the NGOs, three more were tapped by locals until there were an estimated eight to 12 million wells across Bangladesh.

It was not until 1998 that the arsenic problem, and its resulting illness known as arsenicosis, attracted global attention, sparking a massive awareness campaign to identify contaminated wells and prevent their use.

Filtration systems of plastic buckets and sand, as well as locally made urns known as "kolchi", were used to treat arsenic-tainted water, and contaminated wells were painted red to warn people away from their use.

The World Health Organization has said more than 250,000 Bangladeshis could die in the next decade from tainted water, as the presence of arsenic has been detected on the order of several hundred parts per billion. The fate for Nepal and India is equally dire, Adeel said.

Without a viable alternative, which the rivers cannot provide in their current state, Bangladesh, considered "quite rich" in terms of its surface water, is forced in the short term to harvest rainwater, tap deeper wells or rely on rudimentary household or community treatments.

"The problem is that there is no alternative source of fresh water for this population" of mostly rural villagers, Adeel said. "You can paint the wells red, orange or blue and it doesn't matter; you need to provide an alternative."

lg/br

Environment-water-SAsia-arsenic

Length: 418 words

Keywords: Environment; water; SAsia