

### World Water Forum ends in flood of commitments

The eight-day meeting held in the three neighbouring cities of Kyoto, Shiga and Osaka, Japan, ended on 23 March by issuing a statement of commitment. Overall, this was “to facing the global water challenges” and achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving, by 2015, the proportion of poor people without secure access to water and sanitation. To do so, groups participating in the Forum made over 100 commitments, but what these add up to, and the extent to which they are and compatible, remains to be seen.

“The third World Water Forum has become a truly action-oriented conference,” said Kenzo Hiroki, its Vice Secretary-General. Over 24 000 participants from 182 countries attended — well over three times as many people as expected. Their main concerns were with meeting the increasing human need for adequate water supplies, and balancing these with the demands of health, sanitation, food production, transportation, energy and environmental protection. Most countries also stressed the need for effective government, improved capacity, and adequate financing to manage these issues.

Global water consumption has increased tenfold in the last century, according to SustainAbility, a develop-

ment consulting firm. Over a billion people in the world have no access to safe drinking-water, and 2.4 billion lack adequate sanitation. A result is that 3 million people die from preventable waterborne diseases every year. The World Trade Organization and industry groups see the market as the only way to organize the distribution of this increasingly scarce resource, by setting a price on it. Others, such as Maud Barlow and Tony Cark, authors of *Blue gold*, see this approach as “the corporate theft of the world’s water”.

Lyla Mehta, of the Institute of Development Studies in the UK, told the *Guardian* that “Because many people think of water as a basic human right, they react angrily to the idea of private companies making profits out of water provision”. She cites protests and revolts in Bolivia, Ghana, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, and other developing countries, over the privatization of water supply systems.

The participants of the Water Forum had till 30 April to finalize the content and wording of their commitments. These included setting up a global flood warning system, organizing a consortium of institutions to support governments in managing their water supply systems, financing communities to solve or mitigate their water and sanitation problems, and strengthening the capacity of indigenous people to protect their water rights.

The final statement said that increasing the efficiency of water use may not be sufficient to meet the growing demand for water in many developing countries, particularly in cities. “All options to augment the available water supply, including increased storage through the use of groundwater recharge and dams, need to be considered, ensuring that all those who will be affected will also benefit.” It concluded: “A wider adoption of good practice is required in order to avoid the environmental and social costs and risks of the past.”

More concretely, Sir Richard Jolly, Chair of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, points out that although about US\$ 10 billion a year is currently spent on water and sanitation, meeting the MDG for water and sanitation will require “at least a doubling of this level of investment”. ■

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