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## ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: Water Aplenty, Nor a Drop to Drink

By Keya Acharya

**NEW DELHI, Apr 18 (IPS) - Over 37.7 million people in India are affected by water-borne diseases due to contaminated drinking water supply and an estimated 1.5 million children die of diarrhoea each year, according to newly available statistics.**

Compiled through collaboration between the government and the international non-government organisation (NGO) Water Aid the new figures belie official claims that 94 percent of rural 94 percent of rural and 91 percent of urban populations now have access to safe drinking water.

According to Water Aid the difference is that until now there has been no mention in official statistics of the quality of water supplied to these populations, or of its sustained year-round supply.

Lizette Burgers, chief of Water, Environment and Sanitation at UNICEF says that in spite of India's efforts at reaching water to millions, "increasing populations, bacterial infections and other problems have resulted in significant difference in effective coverage".

According to UNICEF statistics over one-third of the world's population that lives without access to sanitation live in India. "The greatest problem for water quality in India is from human and animal faeces," said Burgess. "The world is looking at India to see what it does for the Millennium Development Goals(MDG) in this sector", commented Burgess.

India is committed to the MDG in the water-sector to halve, by 2015, the numbers of its people without access to safe drinking water.

Depinder Kapur of WaterAid- India says the organisation got alerted to the issue of contaminated water-supply from their 'extensive engagements' with various communities across India.

Kapur said in Water Aid's experience the main sources for India's polluted water-supply remain open defecation, lack of sanitation, over-exploitation of groundwater resources and chemicals leaching into water sources.

The most serious victims of this pollution are India's rural villages, constituting nearly 70 percent of the country's population.

Arsenic and fluoride contamination from over-used groundwater, wherein the water drawn hits rock-bottom, is another serious health hazard facing rural communities. A newly-emerging cause of anemia, especially in women and children in rural communities, is now thought to be related to fluoride contamination.

"One direct impact of this is affected women giving birth to low birth-weight babies, who in turn are impaired from this pollution with autism, impaired physical and mental growth and several other disorders," says Dr. A.K. Susheela of the Delhi-based Fluorosis Research and Rural Development Foundation.

A 2008 UNICEF report says that 43 percent of the world's low birth-weight infants are born in India.

In support of argument Susheela said that while government of India, in its bid to check anemic pregnancy has been providing folic acid to pregnant mothers since 1970, no positive benefit has been noticed so far. She believes the reason is due to fluoride-contamination damaging intestinal inner walls and making them incapable of absorbing nutrients.

"We are adding to the disabled-child population in India without realising the causative factor," says Susheela.

Approximately 30,000 habitations in various parts of the country are affected by fluoride in their water systems and another 7,000 habitations are affected by arsenic. Both contaminants come from mineral rock sources, emerging due to over-exploitation of groundwater.

Human populations alongside the river Ganges running through northern and eastern India suffering from various levels of arsenic poisoning, according to well-established studies.

Dipankar Chakraborty of the School of Environmental Sciences at the Calcutta-based Jadavpur University, who first brought the issue to public attention about 20 years ago, blames the administration for not heeding to the serious public health-hazard in time.

"The crisis is in the administration's poor management of water supply and can be solved by switching from groundwater sources to the rivers for water supply, Chakravarty said.

Bharat Lal, director of the government's Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission and the department of Drinking-Water Supply admits that the issue of water-quality has been secondary. "We are not monitoring the impact of the water, once access has been achieved."

Lal said there was a serious lack of trained staff for arsenic and fluoride-testing at the district-level and points to unutilised funds given by the central government to various state administrations for water-quality testing.

"The government, municipal and village bodies, responsible for water-supply also abdicate the responsibility of monitoring whilst they supply," said Lal.

(END/2008)

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