



General

2023 WATER CONFERENCE, Transboundary Water Management Cooperation

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2023 WATER CONFERENCE,

INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 4 (PM)

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Transboundary Water Management Cooperation Crucial for Sustainable Development, Peace, Security, Speakers Stress at Conference's Fourth Interactive Dialogue

Transboundary water management cooperation is a critical element in all forms of sustainable development — from conquering water scarcity and protecting biodiversity to building stronger economies and ensuring peace and security — speakers stressed today as the 2023 United Nations Water Conference held its fourth interactive dialogue.

Co-chaired by Serigne Mbaye Thiam, Minister for Water and Sanitation of Senegal, and Christian Frutiger, State Secretary, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of the Swiss Confederation, the interactive dialogue on "Water for Cooperation: Transboundary and International Water Cooperation, Cross Sectoral Cooperation, including Scientific Cooperation, and Water Across the 2030 Agenda (SDG 6.5, 6.b and SDGs 16, 17)" was moderated by Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

Opening the dialogue, Mr. Thiam highlighted the paradox of water: it is scarce and abundant. It is also shared unequally among regions, which can worsen the impact of climate change. Noting that agriculture and industry are major consumers of water, he said that competition over access to water may be in the future and water-related conflicts may increase. Further, there is a lack of governance regarding water and a lack of cooperation frameworks for shared subterranean waters. He urged the international community to recall the centrality of cooperation in realizing Sustainable Development Goal 6 and the important role of hydro-diplomacy in preventing crises. "For Senegal, water should not be a source of tension, but rather a bridge between people," he said. Detailing examples of successful cooperation, he stressed the importance of promoting stability in the region through integrated management of subterranean resources. Moreover, he called for strengthened follow-up mechanisms. Water must bring people together and remain essential for peace and resilience, he said, citing cooperation as "the way forward".

Mr. Frutiger, underlining the importance of transboundary cooperation, declared: "Water is a source of life and a source of tension." It is rare and irreplaceable and leads to major geopolitical challenges. With knowledge about climate change and conflicts, good governance of this "blue gold" may be a factor of peace. Switzerland is considered to be the "chateau of water" in Europe, with six water sources and four lakes that the country shares with its neighbours — France, Germany, Italy and Austria. The country's first transboundary agreements are the result of complex negotiations and compromise, he said, highlighting benefits of transboundary water management. Detailing concrete experiences of successful transboundary cooperation, he also said that good governance of water can impact sustainable development and prosperity of the region.

A panel discussion was then held featuring Hong Ha, Deputy Prime Minister of Viet Nam; Hasan Nasir Jamy, Deputy Minister, Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources of Pakistan; Ahmet Mete Saatçi, Emeritus Professor, member of the Board of Governors of World Water Council 2019-2022 of Türkiye; and Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE).

Mr. Ha, reporting that 60 per cent of his country's water stems from transboundary rivers, said that it is currently rolling out a cooperation model for the Mekong River. He further noted that 40 per cent of the global population resides around transboundary river and lake basins. Thus, they must be seen as consistent and single entities from downstream to upstream, including their natural habitats, biodiversity and the culture of those basins. He emphasized the need for a means of collective management across basins, and a model for cooperation, as water is a shared common denominator for development among countries. He further called for a legal framework for river basins, promoted by the United Nations, and the establishment of agencies and organizations to assess any possible impacts and outline plans for their management and ensuring cultural values. Capable organizations and financial arrangements must be established, and lives and environments must be protected, with ethical standards set up for managing water resources collectively in a just and fair manner, he stressed.

Mr. Saatçi said that, at a previous panel, it was agreed that, unfortunately, there is no general theory on transboundary cooperation as it changes with place and time. Citing several points, he stressed that the first driver for cooperation is mutual benefit-sharing. Türkiye has five transboundary waters, but is not a water-rich country as most think; it is a downstream country for two rivers, and an upstream one for three of them. He underlined the importance of reciprocity, pointing out that, if one side offers most of the data or value, while the other does not or cannot, the cooperation will not be stable. He further noted the importance of goodwill, trust and agility in the process, as the cooperation model is a complex system. On cross-sectoral cooperation, he cited the example of cooperation on public health under pressure, demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the importance of the science-policy interface in detecting the presence of the virus in wastewater for 85 million people, with work from two laboratories and help from international ones, as well.

Ms. Algayerova said that progress on transboundary water cooperation in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal target 6.5 is "badly off track". Lack of cooperation on shared waters hinders the achievement of other Goals and creates risks of conflicts over dwindling water resources. However, States have tools to accelerate transboundary water cooperation and should fully leverage existing legal instruments, particularly the two United Nations water conventions — the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (Water Convention) and the Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (Watercourses Convention). Describing the lack of capacity as a major barrier to advancing cooperation, she said that the Water Convention offers an intergovernmental framework that provides policy responses to emerging challenges, such as the integration between water, energy, food and environmental needs and water allocation in transboundary settings. Unilateral adaptation measures can lead to maladaptation, transfer of risks and tensions. On the contrary, transboundary cooperation makes adaptation more effective through the sharing of data, costs and benefits. Highlighting the importance of transformative solutions, she said that the Water Convention is precisely a solution offering multiple benefits for sustainable development and climate action.

Mr. Jamy said that the global pressures on the quality and quantity of water have increased since the 1980s. Estimates suggest that 2.3 billion people currently live in water-stressed countries. Pakistan is no exception to the above-mentioned trend. With a rapidly growing population, the country is likely to transition from a water-stress to a water-scarce country in the coming future. Additionally, across the globe, climate change is placing additional pressure both on the quality and the quantity of the world's water resources. As one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change, Pakistan faces multiple challenges, as seen in the devastating floods in 2022. He also stressed that Pakistan's main water resource is highly sensitive to climate change due to its dependency on glacier and snow melt. Noting that Pakistan attaches great importance to transboundary agreements, he said that the country shares surface and groundwater resources with two neighbouring countries. The water-energy-food-ecosystem nexus offers potential to accelerate progress across multiple goals. The principle of valuing water is at the heart of Pakistan's national climate change and food security policy, he added, underlining the crucial role of international scientific cooperation in facilitating innovative solutions to water resources challenges. In this regard, he drew attention to Pakistan's plans to reduce water wastage.

The interactive dialogue also included four discussants, including Norbert Totschnig, Federal Minister for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management of Austria; Danilo Türk, Lead Political Advisor, Geneva Water Hub, President of Club de Madrid, and Former President of Slovenia; Maria Gwynn, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Public International Law at the University of Bonn, and Governing Council member of Itaipú Binacional; and Daouda Samba Sow, Secretary General of Gambia River Basin Development Organization.

Mr. Totschnig said that Austria, a landlocked country, has many freshwater sources and alpine lakes across political borders and has created a mutually beneficial environment by establishing transboundary institutions and frameworks for cooperation by bringing together specialists in wastewater treatment. In close cooperation with the World Bank and the International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area, the country implemented the Danube Water Programme 10 years ago, with smart policies and sustainable water and wastewater services in all partner countries of the region. The number one priority remains providing clean drinking water and adequate sanitation for all — while, at the same time, seeking out ways to optimize the indirect use of water, taking into account the food-water-energy-ecosystem nexus. Water is essential for food production, and in Austria, some 60 per cent of electricity is produced by hydropower. The country has established a national platform for the future to engage all stakeholders from various sectors. However, the water and sanitation crisis cannot be solved without the efforts of all individuals.

Mr. Türk, commenting that many statistical figures have been mentioned in the past, added a new one: 153 Member States of the United Nations share transboundary waters, something of universal importance. Legal frameworks are necessary and do matter, with institutional underpinning, strengthened bilaterally, regionally and through the United Nations Water Convention. Water cooperation significantly strengthens peace and security, but does not receive appropriate attention. Addressing political will, he said it can be generated in a wide variety of ways. In that regard, the Conference is an important instrument. As the last Conference was some 40 years ago, the messages emerging from this one have to be strong and clear in support for the generation of political will for transboundary water cooperation.

Ms. Gwynn said that South America is rich in natural resources, with most being shared between two or more States. Thus, cooperation is the key mandate to ensure equitable utilization of transboundary natural resources, she said, adding that South America should further strengthen its integration. In 2020 and 2021, South America was hit by one of the worst hydrological crisis in its history. This brought about tensions among riparian States, each wanting to secure their use of an international river to satisfy their respective demands. However, States and key actors opted for a dialogue and cooperated through the exchange of data and managed to achieve a solution. She described this special operation, “Water Windows”, as a successful example of transboundary water cooperation.

Mr. Sow, calling attention to the Gambia River Basin Development Organization’s development programmes, said the organization works on preserving and conserving the environment. In this regard, he pointed to a strategic energy project that is in line with the West African Power Pool goals. He also drew attention to the integrative development plan in the basin that falls under his organization’s jurisdiction, helping it to establish a strategic framework of planning for its entire basin. As well, it implements projects with other States, he reported, highlighting one of its recent projects with Guinea. As well, Guinea-Bissau — despite not being a part of the Gambia’s river basin — benefits from the hydroelectric project between Senegal and Guinea. The organization seeks to implement projects in line with financial and technical partner support, contributing to African subregional integration and peace and security of Member States.

When the floor opened for interventions, speakers stressed that the transboundary water basin situation is in dire straits and offered solutions to speed up progress on water cooperation in shared basins, transboundary rivers, lakes and aquifers.

The representative of Iraq pointed out that an estimated 107 countries are not on track to have sustainable water resources by 2030. Of the 153 States sharing transboundary lakes, rivers or aquifers, only 32 have at least 90 per cent of their transboundary basin area covered by operational arrangements for transboundary water cooperation. In his country, the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers provide up to 98 per cent of its surface water, but, over the last 40 years, the flow has decreased by 30 to 40 per cent, causing marshland in the south to become dry. Agriculture in the south has seriously suffered from the lack of fresh water, and citizens have suffered from drinking salinized and polluted water. He called for better and more effective management of available water resources, and for all States to join his country in acceding to the Watercourses Convention and the Water Convention.

The representative of Slovenia said his country has a well-developed transboundary water cooperation tradition on bilateral, subregional and regional platforms — with the Sava River basin being one of the best global examples of how this can develop in the aftermath of devastating war and pave the way for building trust, regional stability, peace, sustainable development and climate action. Transboundary water cooperation is therefore beneficial for upstream water-rich countries like Slovenia. Through implementation of river basin management, planning approaches and processes, the country is successfully implementing cross-sectoral cooperation. Along the seacoast, the country combines special planning of local communities with marine special planning to support the source-to-sea approach.

The representative of Mozambique noted that water resource management is a strategic issue for his country, as it shares 9 of the 15 river basins of Southern Africa. Located downstream, Mozambique is highly vulnerable to extreme events like floods and droughts — as 54 per cent of water resources originate in upstream countries, of which 80 per cent of runoff comes from Zimbabwe, South Africa and Eswatini. It is critical for his country to adopt strategies and policies to mitigate the negative impacts of its dependence on that water for its socioeconomic development, due to insufficient water conservation infrastructure and increased saline intrusion into rivers. Mozambique is working to prioritize consensus on international cooperation, negotiating for shared basin management, and has signed a number of river agreements with Eswatini, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The representative of Panama said that effective international cooperation is the only way to manage transboundary water. This is essential for peoples who are directly affected by conflicts of scarcity or mismanagement of this resource. International cooperation is an effective tool to implement these projects and to decentralize water management so that local authorities have the financial resources to properly manage the resource. Highlighting Panama’s cooperation with Costa Rica, he pointed to his country’s committee which includes members of civil society and local authorities in the management and protection of water. He recalled that more than 40 years ago, Costa Rica and Panama decided to manage a common basin, declared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the common heritage of humankind.

The representative of Namibia said that cooperation is a necessity in fighting a crisis. The COVID-19 crisis touched everyone. However, in terms of prevention and vaccination, countries were not treated equally. Turning to water crisis, he said: “if we follow the bad road” — the road of inequality — this issue will not be solved. Calling for equality in measures across the board, he said: “We should not only talk about the needs of humans for water.” There are other living creatures in this world that need this resource.

In closing remarks, Mr. Thiam urged stakeholders to pay particular attention to water issues in bilateral and multilateral cooperation at the subregional, regional and international levels. Moreover, he voiced support for integrated management of water resources, underlining the importance of mutually beneficial partnerships for transboundary basins. Calling on States to place dialogue at the heart of resolving differences, he described transboundary cooperation as a major initiative that will enable to consolidate actions undertaken to operationalize cooperation on all levels.

Mr. Frutiger, expressing support for the appointment of a Special Envoy for Water, said that promoting water should be one of the United Nations priorities for the years to come. “We need a strong voice that can really mobilize the international community,” he said, calling for a strengthened transboundary cooperation on water. By working together — on the basis of the two United Nations water conventions — and by developing shared partnerships with civil society and the private sector, the international community can overcome water-related challenges and build a more prosperous future, he said.

Also speaking were the representatives of Luxembourg, Uzbekistan, Republic of Moldova, Bangladesh, Finland, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Egypt, Estonia, Mozambique, Kyrgyzstan, United States and Portugal.

Representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Secretariat for Water, Organization of American States, World Bank, North American Youth Parliament for Water and the World Meteorological Organization also spoke.

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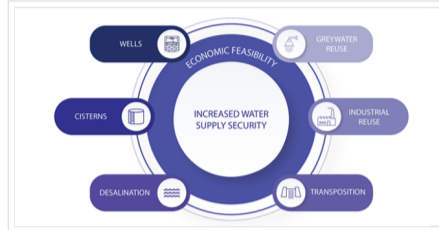
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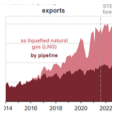
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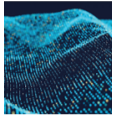
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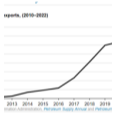
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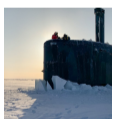
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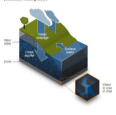
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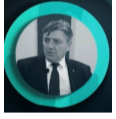


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