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Cooperation for Shared Water Resources Key to Bringing Adversaries Together, Ending Conflicts, Secretary-General Tells Security Council

Following are UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's remarks to the Security Council open debate on water, peace and security, in New York today:

Je remercie la présidence sénégalaise et Son Excellence Monsieur Mankeur Ndiaye (FM) d'avoir organisé ce débat à un moment crucial.

D'ici à 2050, au moins un être humain sur quatre vivra dans un pays où le manque d'eau douce est chronique ou récurrent. Les changements climatiques ne feront qu'aggraver ces difficultés, notamment dans les bassins communs à plusieurs pays.

Il importe particulièrement de coordonner la gestion de l'eau pour ce qui est des plus de 260 cours d'eau internationaux et des aquifères transfrontières, qui sont au moins aussi nombreux.

Access to water can exacerbate communal tensions. Competition for scarce water resources in Darfur and Afghanistan has contributed to tensions. In Peru, the extractive industries' impact on water is the most common driver of protests and violence against companies by local communities.

Armed conflicts can themselves affect access to clean water, for example through the deliberate destruction of water facilities, attacks against power plants that provide water supplies, and the collapse of water treatment and sewage systems. These impacts are often compounded by the breakdown in water governance and delivery networks that typically occurs during conflicts.

Air strikes against water and electrical facilities in Syria, and the contamination of groundwater resources in Gaza, are further examples of the negative impact of armed conflict on water.

We have also seen warring parties seek to control dams and dikes. Controlling strategic dams on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers has been at the centre of military operations carried out by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) in Syria and in Iraq.

Despite these serious challenges, we must also recognize the potential for cooperation around shared water resources. Three quarters of United Nations Member States share rivers or lake basins with their neighbours.

Shared water has historically — and sometimes rather improbably — brought adversaries together, and served as a crucial confidence-building measure in both inter-State and intrastate conflicts. In the second half of the twentieth century, more than 200 water treaties were successfully negotiated.

International river agreements have enhanced security and stability in river basins. The 1960 Indus Waters agreement between India and Pakistan has famously survived at least two wars and numerous clashes and diplomatic crises.

In the Nile Basin, last year's signing of a Declaration of Principles by the Governments of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, followed more recently by various formal and informal dialogues, has been a vital confidence-building measure.

And in the Senegal River Basin, riparian States including Mali, Mauritania and Senegal have had a long history of benefit-sharing, providing a cornerstone for regional stability and peace. The United Nations has actively promoted the potential of water for cooperation.

The work of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia on “hydro-diplomacy” is one notable example. The Centre uses its good offices, convening power, analytical capacity and partnerships with regional organizations to promote dialogue and build trust. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Water Convention strengthens transboundary water cooperation and sound water management. It is now open for accession to all United Nations Member States offering the opportunity to create a global framework for dealing with transboundary water issues.

More generally, the United Nations actively promotes mediation and dialogue as effective tools for preventing and resolving disputes over water and natural resources. The United Nations Department of Political Affairs and the United Nations Environment Programme have published a useful guide containing practical strategies and best practices in this area.

Across all these efforts it is also important to recognize the central role played by women in local water management. Decisions over water allocation can have a significant impact on their well-being and safety, and that of their children and families. For this reason, women often, and rightly, advocate for water issues to be directly addressed within peace agreements, as we saw for example with the Darfur peace process.

Pour mobiliser une action diplomatique concertée, le Président du Groupe de la Banque mondiale et moi-même avons lancé le Groupe de haut niveau sur l'eau. Cette initiative promeut une mise en valeur et une gestion globales et coopératives des ressources en eau, et la contribution que le Sénégal y a apportée est capitale. Je vous encourage à trouver des moyens d'appuyer l'application du Plan d'action du Groupe, qui a été adopté récemment.

Water challenges affect us all. Let us use this Security Council meeting to highlight the value of water as a reason for cooperation, not conflict. And let us commit to invest in water security as a means to ensure long-term international peace and security.

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