

Issue Date: Saturday, November 11, 2006

PEACE, WATER AND TOILETS

Peacekeeping is a tough job, and the United Nations has to do a great deal of it. Cyprus, Lebanon, Georgia, Kosovo, Ethiopia, Liberia and Sudan are among the many regions of conflict where the UN's forces are trying, in its own words, to "create conditions of sustainable peace". Yet, one of the destructive effects of conflict — or what is better known as 'terror' today — is that it blinds nations and well-meaning organizations to other, perhaps more essential, conditions that need to be created and sustained as well. So the UNDP's *Human Development Report 2006* reads like the 'humanitarian' half of the UN pointing out to its 'peacekeeping' half crucial instances of certain priorities gone seriously askew. And this is not only self-criticism, but also a rebuke and warning to both affluent and developing nations about what really matters in human well-being.

Water and sanitation, for instance. "Delivering clean water, removing waste water, and providing sanitation," the report enumerates, "are three of the most basic foundations for human progress." But 1.1 billion people do not have access to water, and 2.6 billion do not have access to sanitation. This makes their condition one of "profound deprivation", caused not by water scarcity, but by poverty, inequality and government failure. Moreover, nearly two million children die every year for want of clean water and proper sanitation. Throughout the report, in the case of most of the countries hardest hit by such deprivation, two truths about the situation are reiterated. First, although unclean water is an immeasurably greater threat to human security than violent conflict, most countries spend less than one per cent of national income on water. The report estimates the total additional cost of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) on access to water and sanitation at about ten billion dollars per year. But this sum has to be put in place. It is less than five days' worth of global military spending and less than half of what rich countries spend each year on mineral water. In Ethiopia, for instance, the military budget is 10 times the water and sanitation budget; in Pakistan, 47 times.

Second, almost everywhere, the poorer one is, the more one pays for water. People living in urban slums typically pay 5 to 10 times more per litre than people living in high-income areas. The report also argues, in this context, that the public-versus-private debate on water is not helping the poor. Nor is the common belief, in countries arguing for the privatization of water-supply, that the poor are only too willing to pay for their water. They are actually left with little choice in this matter. The privatization debate, according to the report, only distracts attention from the inadequate performance of both public and private water providers in overcoming the global deficit.

Although on track for the 2015 MDG for access to water, India would do well to heed the report's warnings. Besides, India still has to catch up with its target for access to sanitation by that date.

