

Water Woes



woman fetching contaminated water in Tanzania

Running Low

World leaders meet to discuss the planet's water problems.

It isn't easy for Mexico City resident Carmen Martinez to get water. She lives in Iztapalapa, one of the poorest slums of the Mexican capital. A **slum** is a crowded, dirty area with poor living conditions within a large city.

Once every eight days, she wakes up before dawn and treks down a hill from her run-down shack to a pumping station to beg for water. She stands in line with as many as 150 other people. When her turn finally comes, she gets aboard a tanker truck full of brownish, smelly liquid.

The truck then climbs the hill and pours the water into a dumpster and six barrels. Martinez and her family use that water to bathe, clean, and wash. Although the water is free, it is not **potable**, or drinkable, so Martinez also buys bottled water at a store. She imagines what it would be like "to just turn on a faucet."

Representatives from 148 countries met in Mexico City in 2006 for the fourth World Water Forum in the

hopes of making Martinez's dream a reality. More than 1 billion people around the world do not have access to safe drinking water, according to the United Nations. The forum participants met to exchange ideas about how to quench the thirst of the world's soaring population.

Precious Resource

Although more than two-thirds of Earth's surface is covered in water, there is only a limited amount of drinking water in the world. Salty seawater makes up about 97 percent of the world's water. Another 2 percent of water is frozen at the North and South Poles.

Half a percent of the water is too far underground to be reached, which leaves about half a percent of **fresh water** for all the people and animals on Earth. Fresh water does not have any salt in it. Earth's fresh water supply is renewable only by **precipitation**, such as rain, sleet, or snow.

Although most Americans have access to clean water, people in many countries around the world do not. Some countries in Central and South America, Asia, and Africa have some of the most **contaminated**, or dirty, water in the world. Chemicals from factories, fertilizers from farms, and untreated sewage get washed into the water supply. In addition, many poor countries don't always have a way to collect and **conserve**, or save, water.

Searching for Solutions

Participants at the seven-day World Water Forum discussed ways of pooling the world's money and resources to save water. They proposed building more dams to collect rainwater.

The participants suggested that more decision-making power about water be given to people in small towns and villages. They also called for governments, not corporations, to take charge of providing water. Around the world, people agree that access to water is a basic human right.

Governments know they need to act now to save the world's liquid resource. "Water is endangered and so are we all," Loïc Fauchon, president of the World Water Council, told reporters.