

PRESS STATEMENT

5 August 2010

**Time for Asian Governments to Implement
the Right to Clean Water and Sanitation**

(4 August 2010, Bangkok) Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) calls on Asian governments to take concrete measures in realising the right to water and sanitation following a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 28 July 2010, recognizing “the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights.” The resolution was supported by 122 countries, 41 countries abstained from voting and none voted against.

While welcoming the adoption of the resolution, we regret that among countries that abstained, two Asian countries, Japan and the Republic of Korea, are included and supported the reason that there is no legal basis for the right to water and sanitation. Other 21 Asian countries voted in favour of the resolution.¹

The abstention by Japan and Republic of Korea in affirming the right to water and sanitation is unacceptable, and their reasoning flimsy. Access to safe water and sanitation is absolutely essential for a person to live a healthy and dignified life. The right to life is the most fundamental of rights, which is enshrined in both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which both Japan and Republic of Korea are state parties.

Access to safe water and sanitation plays a very crucial role in different aspects of the life of a person and the existence of communities in the economic social and cultural spheres. Fundamental rights such as education, work and especially health are premised on access to these two public goods. Furthermore, entire societies and communities have formed their identities and existence based on their relationship with water, necessitating its protection for their own collective survival.

It is therefore imperative for governments to ensure that safe water and sanitation are accessible to all in terms of adequate quantity and quality. These measures should include aligning domestic laws in recognising the right to water and sanitation and preserve water as public goods.

The UN recognizes that 884 million people have no access to safe drinking water and more than 2.6 billion people lack access to basic sanitation. In Asia where the 60% of world population resides, the lack of clean water and sanitation affects a bigger proportion of the population. More importantly in Asia, community water supplies remain largely untreated, and compounded by the increasing pollution of fresh water resources like rivers, lakes and underground sources. This results in serious harm and endangers of individuals’ lives,

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Asian countries that voted in favour: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Vietnam

Asian countries absent: Philippines (Note: This list only includes Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia)

particularly those whose lives are closely linked to the environment. Furthermore, the lives and livelihood many communities are threatened by the entry of commercial and industrial projects which consume unprecedented volumes from and also pollute traditional water sources.

Concretely for example, of the 412 rivers in the Philippines, 50 are biologically dead; and in countries like China, India and the Philippines, the total availability of water per person per year has fallen below the global threshold due to water stress.² Seven countries in Asia are among the 10 largest users of water in the world³. Slum dwellers in large cities pay five to 10 times more for water than those living in rich neighbourhoods.

FORUM-ASIA believes that the resolution is an important step towards the realisation of the human right to access to safe water and sanitation. The resolution reinforces the mandate of the Independent Expert on the issues of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation. More importantly, we hope that this landmark resolution will push Asian countries to better protect and promote the right to water of all individuals and communities, and not only focus on the transfer of water and sanitation technology to developing countries. Recognition of the human right to safe water correctly puts people at the centre of the issue of access to these essential needs.

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² UN Discusses Water, a Fundamental Human Rights, AsiaNews.it, 16 July 2010, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/UN-discusses-water,-a-fundamental-human-right-18951.html>

³ The 10 largest users of water in the world are including India, China, Pakistan, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Russia, the U.S. and Mexico.