



‘Natural Resources Conflicts in Africa: Is Water Really the New Oil?’

**Venue: United Nations Conference Centre
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA, 13th – 14th November 2008**

‘Just as war over fire sparked conflict among early pre-historic tribes, wars over water may result from current tensions over this resource in the next few years’ PricewaterhouseCoopers Report, 2001

In 2004, the UN warned that dwindling water resources in Africa could lead to conflicts and food shortages. Back in 2001, the UN had warned then that there were at least 300 potential conflicts over water around the world. Many of these were from squabbles over river boundaries, use of water from shared lakes and aquifers as more than two thirds of the 60 water basins in Africa are shared by more than one country. The 2004 “Water for Food and Ecosystems” conference held in Addis Ababa sounded warning bells that demand for water was increasing in line with the increasing global population and coupled with the strained resources and pollution, water related conflicts were set to increase. An indicator of the level of conflicts is the number of refugees generated by water conflicts in the Horn of Africa. Also, pastoralist communities all over the continent are already fighting over water and pasture. No one is spared as the urban poor already battle to access water and sanitation facilities are scarce for many of them making the achievement of the 2015 Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people without access to water impossible.

Conflicts over water resources in Lake Victoria, the Nile River, the Senegal river, the Zambesi (Chobe river) and the Orange river are imminent threats to human security on the continent especially as people continue to seek a higher standard of living without due regard for the management of water resources. This conference is thus aimed at demonstrating that comprehending conflicts over water in Africa is a complex procedure that requires a multi-disciplinary approach. This is because mono- causal theories are clearly inadequate especially when conflicts are taken out of their socio-economic and political contexts. Water scarcity has always triggered migrations that in turn trigger group identify conflicts and this increases competition for both land and water resources in the new areas of settlement. New immigrants challenge existing traditional norms governing the use of such life sustaining common resources hence the containment of such conflicts hinges very much on understanding the nature and root causes of the conflict. We can thus pose a critical

question: What then is the likely future scenario on the continent in the advent of worsening water scarcity? More importantly, how can the regional bodies prepare to mitigate the impact of such conflicts? Many other questions arise from the impact of this dwindling resource. For instance; Is armed violence typical of the drylands of Africa where pastoralist communities are permanently on the move? The Horn of Africa and the Sahel region where there are high populations of pastoralists bear testimony to this fact and yet we forget that as the desert expands, these communities will be forced to move to more habitable areas.

Environmental scarcity theories have demonstrated clearly that scarcity can be a deep-rooted cause of conflict and the likely upsurge in water related conflicts is likely to reach unprecedented levels in the near future due to a number of factors such as the depletion and degradation of forests, freshwater sources, ozone depletion and climate change. Only the extent of preparedness by all stakeholders will determine the capacity to contain the anticipated conflicts. But more importantly, the processes and methods through which these threats become interwoven hold the key to mitigating the pending catastrophes.

The overall objective of this conference is to share experiences on water related conflicts on the continent. Water resource management practices amongst African countries making it possible to identify imminent threats that are likely to be exacerbated by climatic changes. The conference is thus seeking to bring together practitioners, policy-makers and researchers who have an interest in the socio-political dimensions of water resources related conflicts. This will make it possible to explore strategies for adapting to the uncertainties of climate change to support the enhancement of human security by minimizing conflicts.

The issues of water related conflicts will be explored through the following themes:

- Sustaining livelihoods -Access to water and poverty
- The role of elected institutions and governance of natural resources
- Health, water quality and water management
- Pastoralist practices and migrations- the perpetual search for water in the dry areas
- Local water knowledge management systems
- The role of river basin authorities
- Models for managing water- related conflicts

In addition to publishing the papers presented at this conference, AHSI also intends to prepare a submission with recommendations for mitigating the impact of water conflicts on human security to the AU Peace and Security Council.