

# A National Disgrace:

## Canada's shameful position on the right to water

**T**he Canadian government has tarnished its reputation on the world stage by continuing to oppose attempts to enshrine the right to water at the United Nations.

At the World Water Forum at The Hague in 2000, in Kyoto in 2003, and in Mexico City in 2006, Canada refused to assert water as a human right. In 2002 and 2003, Canada was the only country to vote against resolutions on the human right to water, stating, "Canada does not accept that there is a right to drinking water and sanitation."<sup>1</sup>

### Pressure's on

Access to clean, fresh water is essential for people and nature, and the UN is starting to take note. In September 2007, at the 6th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Canadian Louise Arbour, presented her report outlining states' obligations under the right to water.

Madame Arbour's report called for stronger regulations governing water companies, including penalties for corporations that commit human rights abuses and restrict people's right to water.

In May 2006, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights rebuked Canada for its position on the right to water, saying it "regretted" Canada's continued opposition, and called on Canada to review its stand. The UK recently reversed its initial opposition to the right to water and is now a supporter. Canada is becoming increasingly isolated as state upon state recognizes the right to water.

### The crisis

The global water crisis is already upon us. Over 1.1 billion people do not have access to safe, clean drinking water, while 2.6 billion are without adequate access to water for basic sanitation. This

<sup>1</sup> Canadian representative Marie Gervais-Vidricaire, Official Records of the Commission on Human Rights, 58th session, April 22, 2002.

crisis is not only due to water scarcity, but also because the international community has failed to adequately manage and provide water for all.

### The solution

A binding convention on the right to water would outline the responsibility of international governments to provide safe drinking water for all citizens, regardless of the community or country they live in. Most importantly, water should be recognized as a fundamental right. This would ensure that access to safe water is not determined by one's ability to pay for it.

A UN convention on the right to water would establish clear reporting and redress mechanisms. It would also help put a stop to the rampant pollution, depletion and abuse of our water sources.

### Guarantees

The global water crisis calls for good governance and for the political will to act. A UN Convention on the Right to Water could help guarantee that:

- Governments (not private companies) ensure affordable access to safe water for drinking, food preparation and sanitation.
- Water is protected as a public trust and delivered as a public service on a not-for-profit basis.
- Environmental protections are instituted, ensuring a safe water supply.
- Water sources are preserved and protected from overuse, pollution, and diversions.

It's not too late for the Canadian government to reverse its position on the right to water and instead, to become a champion for this fundamental right— the world is depending on it.