

Speakers see water a source of cooperation

BY RAYNALD C RIVERA

DOHA: Water could be a source of conflict but could also be a source of cooperation, speakers at the 11th Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade said during a session on 'Water Security in the Middle East' yesterday at Doha Sheraton.

A major report on water security, 'The Blue Peace: Rethinking Middle East Water', which was prepared with input from almost 100 leaders, ministers, senior officials and experts from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories was discussed during the session.

The report, which is the result of a consultations process in seven countries over the last 18 months, aims to provide a comprehensive, long-term and regional framework for thinking about water in the region in light of a number of challenges mainly regional conflicts and climate change.

This framework recognises the potential of water to deliver a new form of peace, while presenting long-term scenarios of risks of wars and humanitarian crises.

Sundeep Waslekar, President, Strategic Foresight Group (SFG), India said the region will be facing acute water crisis in the next decade with the significant depletion of water in major bodies of water in the region such as the Jordan River, Dead Sea, and Tigris and Euphrates.

SFG carried out the report which was sponsored by Switzerland and Sweden.

"Water resources are declining and the decline is very much linked to decline in political wisdom, spirit of cooperation, dialogue and mutual trust," said Waslekar.

Citing an example, Jean-Daniel Ruch, Special Envoy for the Middle East, Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland, said the water issue is at the core of the conflicts between Israel and Palestine, Israel and Lebanon and Israel and Syria.

"The Middle East has not much regional cooperation. There's a need to further the integration in this region as part of peace dynamics, that's why we support this water initiative," said Ruch.

"We have to harness political will to arrive at a result," said

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Selim Catafago, President, Litani Water Authority, Lebanon, as he discussed the important role of circles of cooperation among countries in tackling water management in the region.

Since it is not possible for all countries in the region to cooperate with each other, the approach is to create circles or groups of countries who will have to work together to solve the water problem ensuring equitable distribution of water resources.

"The role of the circles is not to create new law but enhance the existing ones to put an end to water conflict," explained Catafago. Francois Munger, Head of Water Initiatives Division, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland believes on the need of creating platform to avoid conflict. Munger proposed a 'Cooperation Council' comprising water authorities from each country who will create guidelines and prepare projects.

"All processes should be driven by the region. The creation of this council will be a good start for cooperation," he said.

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