



World Environment Day
Water: Two Billion People are Dying for it!
A View from the United Nations

Bjørn Førde
Resident Representative

Letlhakane, June 6, 2003

Director of Ceremonies
Kgosi Modiragale and your colleagues
Honourable Minister of Environment, Wildlife & Tourism,
Mme Pelonomi Venson
and your PS Dr Lucas Gakale
Honourable Councillors here present
Bamangwato Tribal Authority, Rre Sekgoma
General Manager for the Orapa, Letlhakane and Damtshaa mines,
Mr Leonard Makwinja
District Commissioner' representative Ms Moseki
Executive Secretary for the National Conservation Strategy Coordinating Agency, Rre Nchunga
Director of Wildlife & National Parks, Mr Nagafela
Director of Tourism, Mrs Ndzinge
and your colleague Mr Wadza Tema
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure and a privilege for me to be present here in Letlhakane today to participate in the commemoration of this year's World Environment Day.

The issue of water — its quality, its quantity, and its guaranteed availability to all people regardless of income or social status — is one of the most pressing challenges facing the world community today. That is why UNEP, the UN Environment Programme, has chosen the slogan — *Water — Two Billion People are Dying For It!* for this year's World Environment Day commemorations.

Although water is a finite resource, we have doubled our consumption of water over the last 50 years and failed to prevent the degradation of water quality. At the same time, the gulf in water use between rich and poor countries has grown starker. A child born in the developed world consumes 30 to 50 times the water resources of a child from a developing country. Currently 1,2 billion people do not have access to a safe water supply and nearly twice that number lack adequate basic sanitation.

The challenge is enormous. To meet the Millennium Development Goals and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, agreed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development last year, which include the targets of halving by 2015 the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation, the world will need to connect approximately 200,000 people to clean water and 400,000 people to improved sanitation - each day.

That will require three things.

First, innovative financing mechanisms to assure the necessary doubling in financial flows to developing countries for water and sanitation—from current spending of US\$10 billion each year, to about \$20 billion a year.

Second, greatly improved governance of scarce water resources, built around holistic, integrated water resources management strategies that encompass priorities from drinking to agriculture and industrial development.

And third, a clear focus on building capacity where it is needed most: working directly with local communities—especially women—to help craft and implement their own solutions.

UNDP is committed to help developing countries tackle all three challenges and by doing so help achieve all the MDGs.

The various themes that run through the year on water emphasise the importance and urgency of providing an adequate supply of water to all the people of the world. It is a sad fact that one third of our fellow human beings face lives of disease and hardship simply because they lack access to safe water or proper sanitation — the most important elements for a healthy and productive life. Experience has shown that those who are hardest hit by this phenomenon are overwhelmingly the poorest people of the developing world — especially their children.

The environmental problems that we see around us here are not unique to Botswana. Countries all over the world are seeing land that was once productive become wasted through its inappropriate use.

I address you today on behalf of the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan. I am sure he would have preferred to address you himself, but as you may be aware, due to other pressing matters elsewhere and the vastness of the international community, it is not practical for him to address you personally.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is now my singular honour to share with you the Secretary General's statement on this year's theme:

“The theme of World Environment Day 2003 — “Water: Two Billion People are Dying for It!” — highlights the centrality of water to human survival and sustainable development.

At the Millennium Summit and World Summit on Sustainable Development, the international community set measurable, time-bound commitments for the provision of safe water and sanitation. These targets — to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation services, both by the year 2015 — are vital in and of themselves, but are also crucial if we are to meet the other Millennium Development Goals, including re-

ducing child mortality, combating malaria, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, empowering women, and improving the lives of slum dwellers.

Current statistics are disturbing. One person in six lives without regular access to safe drinking water. Over twice that number — 2.4 billion people — lack access to adequate sanitation. Water-related diseases kill a child every eight seconds, and are responsible for 80 per cent of all illnesses and deaths in the developing world — a situation made all the more tragic by our long-standing knowledge that these diseases are easily preventable.

Although the provision of water services has risen across the developing world during the past 20 years, those gains have largely been cancelled out by population growth. Many parts of the world now face the spectre of water scarcity because of climate change, pollution and over-consumption. Our challenge is to provide water services to all, especially the poor, to maximize water productivity, especially in agriculture, which accounts for the lion's share of global water use yet is often inefficient in many of its routine water-using practices; and to ensure that rivers and groundwater aquifers that are shared between two or more countries are equitably and harmoniously managed.

What is needed, along with fresh water, is fresh thinking. We need to learn how to value water.

While in some instances that may mean making users pay a realistic price, it must never mean depriving already marginalized people of this vital resource. It is one of the crueller ironies of today's world water situation that those with the lowest income generally pay the most for their water.

Fresh thinking also means finding practical, appropriate solutions to ensure the reliable and equitable supply of water. Some of these solutions are simple and cheap. Rainwater harvesting, for instance, could help up to 2 billion people in Asia alone. End-of-pipe water purification and public health education about basic hygiene practices would go a long way towards alleviating the global disease burden caused by dirty water.

Providing adequate sanitation and sustainable freshwater supplies will also require significant new investment in infrastructure and technology. To meet the agreed targets, it is estimated that annual spending on safe drinking water and sanitation will have to more than double.

On this World Environment Day, in this, the International Year of Freshwater, let us pledge to do our utmost to respond to the plight of two billion of our fellow human beings, who are dying for want of water and sanitation.”