

PRESS RELEASE

United Nations Development Programme



CONFERENCE SPOTLIGHTS WATER CHALLENGES IN IRAQ

Amman, Jordan May 15, 2007: In a concerted effort to assist the Government of Iraq in developing its institutional water management capacity, the Iraq office of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is organizing an extensive three-day conference in Amman, Jordan that will establish a vision for the water sector in the country.

The principal aim of the conference is to spotlight the major challenges to the water sector in Iraq and propose a course of action that includes identifying a long term strategy, strong coordination mechanisms and sound policies for water resource management.

Asserting the importance of the conference, Dr. Abdellatif Al-Rashid, Iraqi Minister of Water Resources said: "No matter how challenging or grave the current events in Iraq might be, it is a national imperative for us to strengthen our capacity and establish a vision for managing our precious water resources. We owe it to our country and future generations." The Minister thanked the Government of Jordan for kindly hosting such an important conference in its capital.

A country rich in resources, that enjoys two major rivers - the Tigris and Euphrates - yet bedeviled by years of conflict and war, the water sector in Iraq has faced a major deterioration in recent years. Contributing factors to this downwards trend include the serious lack of coordination between various public administration bodies, weak capacity to implement a national water resources plan and to negotiate a more equitable share internationally, increasingly depleted resources and environmental degradation. A striking demonstration of its mismanagement is the fact that 90 per cent of Iraq's water resources are currently used for agriculture while it still imports the overwhelming majority of its agricultural products.

"In order to reverse this trend, it is essential to enhance the capacity of the Government to coordinate and develop an integrated water resource management strategy" stated Paolo Lembo, UNDP Iraq Director. He pointed out that across centuries, water – the most essential element for life and the basis of civilization - has been alternatively a source of progress, dialogue and partnership among nations or a source of divisiveness and conflict. "Today," he stressed, "we are sowing the seeds for cooperation between Iraq and its neighbours in sharing this scarce resource in a region of the world currently experiencing a politically exacting challenge."

"It is true that Iraq currently faces major humanitarian challenges, but our duty is not only to rise to the dreadful actualities of the present, but also to set the foundations for sustainable development in the future" he added.

In fact, UNDP globally identified water resource management as one of the major challenges facing human development and the latest Human Development Report focused on this issue. As Kemal Dervis, UNDP Administrator declared on World Water Day: "By strengthening management of water resources, by investing and planning now to confront current and future water problems, and by empowering countries and communities to take more control over their future water situations, we can help to trigger the next leap forward in human development".

Organized in collaboration with major donors and international organizations including ESCWA, UNESCO, Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Governments of Spain, Canada, Australia, and the EU, the conference gathers leading international and regional water experts with a number of key Iraqi Ministers and senior public servants including the Ministries of Water Resources, Planning and Development Cooperation, Foreign Affairs, Environment, Agriculture, and Public Works, as well as the Parliamentary Committee on Water, Agriculture and Marshlands.

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For more information, please contact Ehab Shanti at 962-796249500 or Frances Kinnon at 962-795022481 or by email at: frances.kinnon@undp.org