



UN ranks Canada's water second in the world

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Clean, fresh drinking water. It's a resource many Canadians take for granted. And with good reason. A UN report has rated Canada's water system second best in the world. But for every Canadian who can turn on the tap and draw a clean glass of water, the UN warns there are countless others whose water supply is headed for dire straits.

It's a growing water crisis that the United Nations predicts will only get worse in the years to come.

On Wednesday, UNESCO released the most comprehensive water report in UN history. Involving dozens of UN agencies and commissions, "Water for People, Water for Life" ranks 122 countries according to their access to clean water.

Finland topped the UN list, followed closely by Canada. These two countries won praise for their clean, easily accessed potable water supply.



And at the opposite end of the list? Countries one might expect: Morocco, India, Jordan and Sudan. But at the very bottom, ranked worst, it's not some drought and famine-ravaged desert land. Instead the UN points to modern, industrial Belgium.

Indicative of a quiet, creeping water crisis, the report singles out Belgium for the low quantity and quality of groundwater combined with poor waste water treatment and heavy industrial pollution.

UNESCO's Gordon Young raises the alarm: "There is a health crisis to do with the lack of safe drinking water, to do with the lack of sanitation and hygiene."

It's an almost invisible problem that is threatening the lives of millions of people around the world. "There's more evaporation, less water in rivers and lakes and recharging ground water," Young explains. Unless something dramatic is done, the report warns clean water will become scarce in almost every region of the world.

Right now two out of every 10 people do not have enough clean water. A figure the UN says could rise to seven out of every 10 people by the middle of the century. At worst, seven billion people in 60 countries could face reduced water supplies, at best two billion in 48 countries.

Pollution, global warming and the world's booming population are all to blame. The report found that water supplies decreased by a third between 1970 and 1990, while the world's population is expected to reach about 9.3 billion by 2050.

"Water consumption has almost doubled in the last 50 years," the report says. "Meanwhile, water quality continues to worsen."



It's a combination of factors dealing the most devastating blow to the most vulnerable. "The poor continue to be the worst affected, with 50 per cent of the population in developing countries exposed to polluted water resources," the report explains. As a result, 6,000 children under the age of five die every day from diarrhoeal diseases.

It's a problem so pervasive, many Canadians are questioning the quality of the water supply. University of Alberta professor David Schindler thinks the skepticism is overdue. "The only reason that we apparently have good water -- and we're beginning to question that

after Walkerton and North Battleford -- is that we have a lot of it."

For some Canadians the problem is a real one. Pointing to the many aboriginal Canadians living on reserves, forced to boil their drinking water, Assembly of First Nations regional chief Charles Fox says, "a hundred and ninety First Nations communities across the country are high risk, potential Walkertons."

The UN report calls on rich countries to do more to protect water quality at home while spending more to help developing nations deal with the crisis. Unless this happens, the UN warns water shortages will lead to disease -- even war, and millions of people will die.