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Global water crisis fuelling more conflicts, UN report warns

Water resources under stress as economies and populations grow with 2.2 billion people lacking clean drinking water.



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The UN World Water Development Report 2024, released on Friday, said 2.2 billion people worldwide have no access to clean drinking water and 3.5 billion people lack access to safely managed sanitation.

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Girls and women are the first victims of a lack of water, said the report, published by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), especially in rural areas where they have the primary responsibility of collecting supplies.

Spending several hours a day on fetching water, coupled with a lack of safe sanitation, is a contributing factor to girls dropping out of school.

“Water shortages not only fan the flames of geopolitical tensions but also pose a threat to fundamental rights as a whole, for example, by considerably undermining the position of girls and women,” UNESCO chief Audrey Azoulay said.

While the report did not examine specific current conflicts, Israel has severely restricted access to fresh, clean water during its war on Gaza.

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The report also said: “[Global warming](#) is projected to ... further increase the frequency and severity of droughts and floods, with more wet and very dry weather and climate events.”

Titled Water for Prosperity and Peace, the report found that roughly half of the world’s population is experiencing severe water scarcity with some areas lacking water almost year-round.

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Much of the consequences are felt in [poorer countries](#), which find it harder to adapt. The report estimated that it would cost \$114bn annually to provide safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in 140 low- to middle-income countries.

Quentin Graft from Water Justice Hub, a UNESCO affiliate, told Al Jazeera: “It’s not just a water problem for people in Syria. It’s not just a water problem for people in Sudan. ... It’s a water problem for all of us because we grow our food with freshwater whether it’s irrigated or whether it’s rain-fed, and when you have climate change on top of an already existing water crisis, then we have an inability to feed ourselves.”

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The convention was established in 1992 to help foster responsible joint management of water resources in Europe but opened up in 2016 to countries around the world. It currently has 52 state parties, mainly in Europe, Asia and Africa.

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