

Region only a decade away from severe water crisis

- Published: 00:00 March 4, 2011



- Image Credit: Ahmed Kutty/Gulf News

Abu Dhabi: Without effective policies, change in water usage behaviour and international cooperation, a catastrophic water scarcity will hit the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) region within the next ten years, a senior regional diplomat said in the capital yesterday.

Countries therefore need to cooperate effectively at the regional and international level to avert such a disaster, especially as 60 per cent of the water sources in the region are shared across borders, Abdul Rahman Khalil Ahmad, minister plenipotentiary of water and natural resources at the Sudan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told Gulf News.

"While water safe for drinking and agriculture is running short dramatically in the Mena region, policies to tackle this crisis are lagging behind. We therefore need to include the problem of water scarcity into our foreign policies, and also create public awareness about the problem so that people reduce their water consumption," Ahmad said.

He was speaking on the sidelines of the Arab Water Academy's Water Diplomacy programme, which saw diplomats from 14 different Mena countries in attendance and concluded in Abu Dhabi yesterday.

Tariff controls

Ahmad also said that regional governments should consider introducing water usage tariffs so that people became aware of the value of water.

According to Ato Brown, manager of the Mena water sector at the World Bank Sustainable Development Department, regional water scarcities can only be solved through increased international cooperation.

"Because so much of the region's water is shared, and the population of the region is expected to grow from 200 million to 500 million by 2030, water decisions can only be taken with across-border cooperation and diplomacy," he said. About "60 per cent of all desalination in the world occurs in the Mena region, and this also uses up a great amount of energy."

Rashid Ahmad Bin Fahad, the UAE Minister of Environment and Water, observed that water security was integral to maintaining regional security. "Water is no longer an abundant natural resource. It is scarce, and we need to take this scarcity seriously."

Water scarcity in the MENA region

- Only 1% of world's fresh water is available for human consumption
- 500 million people to be living in MENA region by 2030
- 60% of all MENA water sources are shared across borders
- 60% of all desalination takes place in MENA region
- 5 seas in MENA region