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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
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Address by
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(UNESCO)

at the closing session of the plenary on 'Water for Peace', Third World Water
Forum

Shiga, Japan, 21 March 2003

Excellencies,
Dear colleagues and friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be able to join you at this closing session of the “Water for Peace” theme. At a time when matters of war and peace are on the minds of people around the world, it is an important moment to be looking at water in its relation with questions of peace. In your discussions, you have been considering that relation, especially the role of water as a vehicle for peace and how this role can be performed through education, science, culture and communication.

Through a number of major conferences and international events, not least the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, recent years have witnessed a growing acceptance of the need for a more people-oriented approach to water management and development. These meetings, furthermore, underlined the need for a reinforced cooperation over the use of the world’s 263 international shared river basins.

We have moved beyond the need for more declarations. The priority now is action which implements the many outcomes of the major conferences and international events of recent years. Above all, we must mobilize the necessary effort, goodwill and commitment to ensure that the forecasts of looming water crises do not become true.

For its part, UNESCO has been working closely with Green Cross International, the environmental non-governmental organization headed by former President Mikhail Gorbachev. Our shared purpose is to secure more effective prevention of water-related conflicts. Over the last 15 months or so, our organizations have collaborated on addressing the obstacles, identifying the incentives and promoting the means to achieve integrated and equitable management of shared water resources.

The lessons learned from the first phase of this exercise are many and they are a good omen for those involved in the management of shared water resources. They confirm that it is not impossible for parties with divergent interests to use a common resource harmoniously. The main lesson we have learned is that a successful sharing of a precious resource such as freshwater rests upon learning and applying cooperation, tolerance and mutual respect.

How we perceive and conceptualize a problem, a difference of interest or a clash of opinion is at least as important as any 'objective' view of the circumstances. Thus, even when they are shared between several stakeholders, rivers and aquifers are by no means a source of inevitable conflict. On the contrary, past experience has shown that water can be a catalyst for peace, and there is every reason to believe that they can be such a catalyst in the future.

Similarly, shared water should not automatically be seen as a limited resource over which parties compete and which can only be divided equally between them. Instead, it should be seen as a multi-faceted resource that provides opportunities for creating new benefits to be shared, for solving stakeholders' problems and for meeting their respective interests.

When the management of shared water is handled with the right tools – that is, through cooperation, tolerance and mutual respect - it paves a safe way towards sustainable and peaceful development from every angle: social, economic, political, cultural and ecological. Thus, the benefits that accrue from cooperation over water go far beyond the equitable sharing of the resource between the parties involved.

This is not to deny, of course, that it can be quite difficult to manage conflicting demands among basic needs, industrial and agricultural requirements and the well-being of ecosystems. The uneven distribution of water resources within and among countries, along with diverging water uses, serves to create a potential for cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral conflicts.

Consequently, an immediate and urgently needed action to help deal constructively with such sensitive problems would be the establishment of a facility for information, appraisal and training relating to water management.

During the past two years, UNESCO has assessed the legal, diplomatic and technical tools that are available for anticipating, preventing and resolving water conflicts. We have also developed educational tools designed to enable a wide target audience to manage shared water resources and, above all, to tip the balance away from potential conflict in favour of potential cooperation.

Given its mandate to nurture peace in people's minds through education, science, culture and communication, UNESCO will draw upon the existing tools and will respond to the need for cooperative actions over the use of water resources. In collaboration with a number of partners, UNESCO will provide the "water community" with various forms of support, assistance, guidance and

expertise, especially with a view to building consensus around the use of shared water resources.

It is a pleasure for me to announce today that UNESCO, the World Water Council and other partners will establish a “Water Cooperation Facility”, an international support centre for managing water conflicts and building consensus. This initiative links four organizations which - on demand – will collectively provide distinct and complementary services to aid transboundary waters governance.

UNESCO’s role will be to encourage the political commitment that is sometimes missing when sensitive issues are tackled. UNESCO will also provide a forum that facilitates intergovernmental discussions. And it will coordinate research and capacity-building within the framework of its International Hydrological Programme.

The second partner in this endeavour will be the World Water Council, whose president is Dr Mohammed Abu Zeid, Egypt’s Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation. This international water policy think-tank, which is dedicated to improving the management of the world’s water resources, will help promote awareness on critical water issues at all levels, including the highest decision-making level.

The third partner is the highly respected Permanent Court of Arbitration, based in The Hague, which provides a neutral and prestigious forum accessible to states, private parties and intergovernmental organizations. It will provide legal advice and guidance when it is needed. This intergovernmental legal institution will help in building up a network of international legal experts to support and advise intervention efforts.

Last but not least, the fourth partner is the Universities Partnership for Transboundary Waters. Through its distinctive professional training, graduate education, information resources and research programmes, the Partnership will provide integrated technical and policy perspectives at sites around the world to promote a global water governance culture that balances social, economic, and ecological needs, and works toward peace and poverty alleviation.

Within the framework of the Water Cooperation Facility, the four partners will promote cooperation in order to anticipate, prevent and resolve international water-related conflicts through academic research, training and direct assistance. In

doing so, they will help to build a culture of peace through water. The Facility will be able to react to crises, to assist or intervene in crises – when requested by the parties - and to anticipate and prevent water conflicts. Recognizing that international disputes have local roots, the Facility would address conflicts which cross national, state, sector or interest boundaries.

It is my intention to submit this proposal to the Ministerial Conference as an output of the discussions that were held during the past two days around the “Water for Peace” theme. This commitment will represent a novel contribution to the peaceful sharing of water resources through a new partnership between a inter-governmental organization like UNESCO, a non-governmental one like the World Water Council, an international legal institution such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration and an academic institution like the Universities Partnership for Transboundary Waters.

As I am sure you will agree, the Water Cooperation Facility is a most promising initiative. Let me thank you again for your presence and wish you every success in your future work.

Thank you.