

**Remarks by Senator Richard J. Durbin**  
***Renewing American Leadership on the Global Water Crisis***  
**To the Center for Strategic and International Studies**  
**Russell Caucus Room, United States Senate**  
**March 17, 2009**

**\*\*as prepared for delivery\*\***

I want to thank John Hamre for that generous introduction, and thank my friend, Congressman Earl Blumenauer for his inspiring leadership in our efforts to bring clean water and basic sanitation to the world.

Congressman Blumenauer was the House sponsor of the *Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act*. It is an honor to be working with him, and with Congressman Donald Payne, on the *Paul Simon Water for the World Act*.

As we prepare to mark World Water Day this week, I want to spend a few minutes this morning telling you about the global water challenge as I see it, and what we can do about it.

First, thanks to the Center for Strategic and International Studies for hosting this gathering. Under John Hamre's leadership – and with Steve Morrison at the Global Health Policy Center and Erik Peterson at the Global Strategy Institute – CSIS is one of the first places serious-minded people turn to for dependable, thoughtful analysis and recommendations on tough foreign policy questions. Their contribution to the public debate is invaluable.

I also want to acknowledge the many people who are here representing USAID and other parts of our government, as well as the scores of NGOs, philanthropies, and private companies that are working to solve the global water crisis. Thank you for all of the life-saving work you do.

It seems fitting that we are talking about water on St. Patrick's Day. The lush green hills of Ireland are a stunning example of the benefits of plentiful rainfall. And my staff reminds me that Irish water is an essential ingredient in Guinness, another gift from Heaven.

Water is, of course, essential to human life. It is also true that in the fight against global poverty, there is no better development investment we can make than clean, safe water for the world.

I owe my passion on water to my friend and mentor, the man whose seat I now occupy in the US Senate: the late Senator Paul Simon. I'm so glad to see Patti Simon, Paul's widow and a champion on water in her own right, here with us today.

When I say I'm a follower of the Gospel of St. Paul, Paul Simon is partly who I am talking about. He was a profoundly good and wise man. He was also a visionary. He

saw connections that many people missed. He saw answers to problems before most people even saw the problems.

As many of you know, solving the global water crisis was his last great campaign. In 1998, he wrote a book called "*Tapped Out: The Coming World Crisis in Water and What We Can Do About It.*" It may not have made it on to the *New York Times* bestseller list, but those of us who read it were inspired.

Paul would go anywhere, and talk to anyone, to try to get people and governments to take the global water crisis seriously. In the last year of his life, he traveled to Israel to moderate a panel between the Israeli and Palestinian water commissioners. He said that he – and most of the people in the audience – were amazed that the two commissioners agreed on almost everything.

But when he looked in the newspapers the next day, there was no mention of the meeting. Not a word. He said that was "because nobody was shouting at each other." That's part of the challenge.

The global water crisis is a quiet killer. In the developing world, 5,000 children die every day from easily preventable water-related illnesses such as cholera, typhoid and malaria, diseases that have been all but eradicated in wealthier nations. Most die silently.

Around the world today, nearly 1 billion people lack access to clean, safe water. More than 2 billion people lack access to basic sanitation. Most of these people live on less than \$2 a day. They are the voiceless and the powerless of the world.

And water is not simply a humanitarian challenge. It is a threat to global stability and the global economy. Last June, Goldman Sachs held a meeting to assess the top five risks facing the world economy. Resource scarcity – including competition for water, food and energy – was at the top of the list. *Fortune* magazine recently predicted that the global water crisis will be as serious in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the oil crises were in the 20<sup>th</sup>, potentially leading to war.

Paul Simon understood the potential for conflicts over dwindling supplies of clean water. It alarmed him. He used to say, "Nations go to war for oil, but there are substitutes for oil. There are no substitutes for water." We see that in the roots of the conflict in Darfur.

I saw it two years ago when I travelled to Jordan. I went to Jordan to talk with people there about the impact of the war in Iraq on one of our most important allies in the region.

The Jordanian Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, Ms. Suhair-al-Ali, told me that between 600,000 and 700,000 Iraqi refugees were living in Jordan at that time. That was equivalent to 10 percent of Jordan's entire population. For us in the US, that would be the equivalent of 30 million refugees.

The massive influx of Iraqi refugees had strained the ability of Jordan's government to provide basic services almost to the breaking point. What did the minister identify as one of Jordan's biggest problems? Water.

And it's not just Jordan. Water is central to the fate of the entire Middle East. In his book, Paul Simon quoted former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin as saying, "If we solve every other problem in the Middle East but do not satisfactorily resolve the water problem, our region will explode. Peace will not be possible."

You don't have to travel halfway around the world to see the devastating consequences of lack of access to clean water. A few months ago I traveled to Haiti. This was my second visit and it is always a shock. A 90-minute plane ride from Miami takes you to another world.

There are no public sewage treatment or disposal systems anywhere in the country. Even in the capital, Port-au-Prince, a city of 2 million people, the drainage canals are choked with garbage and sewage.

It is no wonder that Haiti has the highest infant and child mortality rate in the Western Hemisphere. One-third of Haiti's children do not live to see the age of 5. The leading killer? Water-borne diseases: hepatitis, typhoid and diarrhea.

Some years ago I visited Bolivia, one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Bolivia is an example of what awaits many countries' water supplies because of global warming.

Much of its population relies on melting glaciers for its water. But because of climate change the glaciers are not being replenished and some are already disappearing. These trends are happening from the snows of Mount Kilimanjaro to the Alps to the Himalayas.

How will the world respond to the water needs of countries such as Bolivia and others that rely on glaciers for their water supplies?

I recently returned from a visit to Cyprus. The island has been divided now for more than 30 years. The leaders on both sides are engaged in brave and important discussions to reunify the island. Amid this hopeful progress toward peace, another problem plagues this island – water.

The groundwater in Cyprus is being depleted too quickly, often for agriculture, and it is being replenished too often with salt water that creeps into the water table. Global warming is causing rainfall to decrease.

What Paul Simon knew 10 years ago, and the rest of us are slowly coming around to see, is that we can't begin to solve the problems of global hunger and poverty without addressing the global water crisis.

Think about this: People need 50 liters of water per day to meet basic needs. According to Johns Hopkins researchers, the average American uses 578 liters of water per day. In

Africa, home to nearly 1 billion people, the average person uses 47 liters of water per day – three liters less than what the human body requires.

The health consequences of such water poverty are profound. The World Health Organization estimates that, at any given time, close to half the people in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world are suffering from diseases caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation.

Children are especially vulnerable. Diarrhea alone kills nearly 2 million children under the age of 5 each year. As CSIS's "Global Water Futures" report hauntingly points out, that is the equivalent of all the children under age 5 in New York and London combined.

Mothers who fear the deaths of their children bear more, in a desperate race against the odds. And the lack of access to clean water enslaves poor women in other ways, as well. In many poor nations, women and girls walk two or three hours or more each way, every day, to collect water that is often dirty and unsafe.

The UN estimates that women and girls in Sub-Saharan Africa spend a total of 40 billion working hours each year collecting water. That is equivalent to all of the hours worked in France in a year.

A developing economy can't grow if its people are too busy collecting water, or too sick from drinking unsafe water, to work or to go to school. The UN recognized that fundamental reality when it included among its Millennium Development Goals cutting in half the proportion of people living without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015.

That may seem like an unrealistic goal to some, but our own history here in America shows that it is possible to make rapid progress to meet these most basic human needs.

In American cities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, waterborne diseases accounted for one in ten deaths. Back then, the infant mortality rate right here in Washington, DC was nearly twice the rate in sub-Saharan Africa today.

In the mid-1880s, 12 percent of the entire population of Chicago died of waterborne diseases from drinking water from Lake Michigan. At the time, the Lake was used for both water and waste disposal.

The Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, faced failure when the British Medical Journal, *Lancet*, warned visitors that a recent typhoid scourge was evidence that Chicago tap water was unsafe to drink.

The Fair developer, Daniel Burnham, turned to new water filters recently developed by Louis Pasteur for the Fair's drinking fountains and set up a chemical laboratory on the grounds to continually test the water for safety.

Some experts believe water purification alone explains half the reduction in mortality in the US in the first 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Some say the solution to *today's* water shortages is virtually unregulated privatization. Sunday's *New York Times* had a story about Chile's experiment with water rights as private property, not a public resource.

The story described a little town called Quillagua near Chile's northern Pacific coast. A private mining company owns 75 percent of the water rights in the town. Decades ago, before the water became a private commodity, the town supported farming and fishing. Now Quillagua is a dying town. Most of its residents have moved and the town is listed in the record books as the driest place on earth.

I believe there is a better solution. Two years after Paul Simon died, with the leadership of Congressman Blumenauer and others, Congress passed the *Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act*. President Bush signed it into law in December 2005.

It represents the first time the US has codified our commitment to any of the Millennium Development Goals. *The Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act* makes safe water and basic sanitation a top priority for all US foreign assistance.

In 2007 alone, the *Water for the Poor Act* helped provide nearly 2 million people in over 30 countries with access to a better source of drinking water, and more than 1.5 million people with better sanitation. The *Water for the Poor Act* is saving lives. But its impact could be greater.

That is why today, Senator Bob Corker and Senator Patty Murray and I are introducing a new bill – the *Paul Simon Water for the World Act*.

Our bill will reestablish US leadership on water around the world. The goal is to reach an additional 100 million of the world's poorest people with sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015. This would represent the largest single commitment of any donor country to meeting the Millennium Development Goal on water.

Our bill targets aid to areas with the greatest need. It helps build the capacity of poor nations to meet their own water and sanitation challenges.

The bill provides technical assistance...best practices...credit authorities...and training to help countries expand access to clean water and sanitation. Our development experts will design the assistance based on local needs.

Some solutions are very simple and cost very little. I'll give you one example: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control have developed a simple chlorine solution, similar to household bleach, which would allow a family of six to disinfect its drinking water at a cost of less than one penny a day.

I saw a similar lifesaving water treatment when I was in Haiti. I visited a rural health clinic run by a group called Partners in Health. Many of you probably know Dr. Paul Farmer. He is a wonderful man who has improved the lives of so many, from Rwanda to Haiti.

Dr. Farmer showed me a water purification kit that his clinic gave to nursing mothers with HIV/AIDS. This allows them to make formula for their babies and not transmit the virus through breastfeeding. It is simple, inexpensive, and life-saving.

This week, 20,000 water and sanitation experts from around the world are meeting in Istanbul for the fifth World Water Forum. Such cross-border partnerships can yield important scientific and technological breakthroughs. They can also help defuse conflicts over water shortages. Our bill will encourage and support more of these partnerships.

Finally, our bill designates within the State Department a high-level representative to ensure that water receives priority attention in our foreign policy, and establishes a new Office of Water at USAID to implement development assistance efforts related to water.

We ought to be assigning some of our best minds to solve the global water challenge. Right now, however, we don't have the staff at USAID to meet our goals on water or any other urgent development need.

To correct this imbalance and help rebuild our smart power, I recently introduced a bill that would triple the number of USAID Foreign Service Officers by 2012. It's called the *Increasing America's Development Capacity Act*.

President Obama is deeply committed to reducing global poverty, including water poverty – not just because it is right, but because it is in America's national interest.

He has assembled a team of leaders who share his commitment. Secretary of State Clinton and Defense Secretary Gates have both pointed out that development assistance – our generosity and ability help those in need overseas – must be a critical part of our foreign policy efforts.

By bringing safe water and basic sanitation to 100 million of the world's poorest people, the *Paul Simon Water for the World Act* will make America safer by reaffirming our standing as a leader in the fight to end global poverty. It will help prevent humanitarian catastrophes and dangerous conflicts around the world.

Some will say that now is not the time to invest in poor nations half a world away, when our economy is in crisis and so many Americans are hurting. That view is understandable. Recovering from this recession and rebuilding our economy for the long-term must be, and is, our government's top priority, but not our only priority.

The Paul Simon Water for the World Act is a smart strategy that will make our foreign assistance dollars go further and achieve more, which is what we need in these hard economic times.

According to the UN Development Program, every dollar invested in water and sanitation yields an average economic return of \$8. In fact, the UN estimates that meeting the Millennium Development Goal on water will place us roughly 30 percent of the way toward achieving every other Millennium Development Goal.

In closing, the Irish have a saying: “You never miss the water till the well has run dry.” In too many parts of the world today, the wells have already run dry – or they haven’t been dug yet.

As we prepare to mark World Water Day this Sunday, let’s recommit ourselves to a new effort on safe water and sanitation. Throughout history, civilized nations have put aside political differences to address compelling issues of life and survival. Our generation owes the world nothing less.

Working together, we can make a real difference in the lives of the world’s poor. Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

###