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Of Water and War: The Delicate Relationship Between Water Scarcity and Conflict

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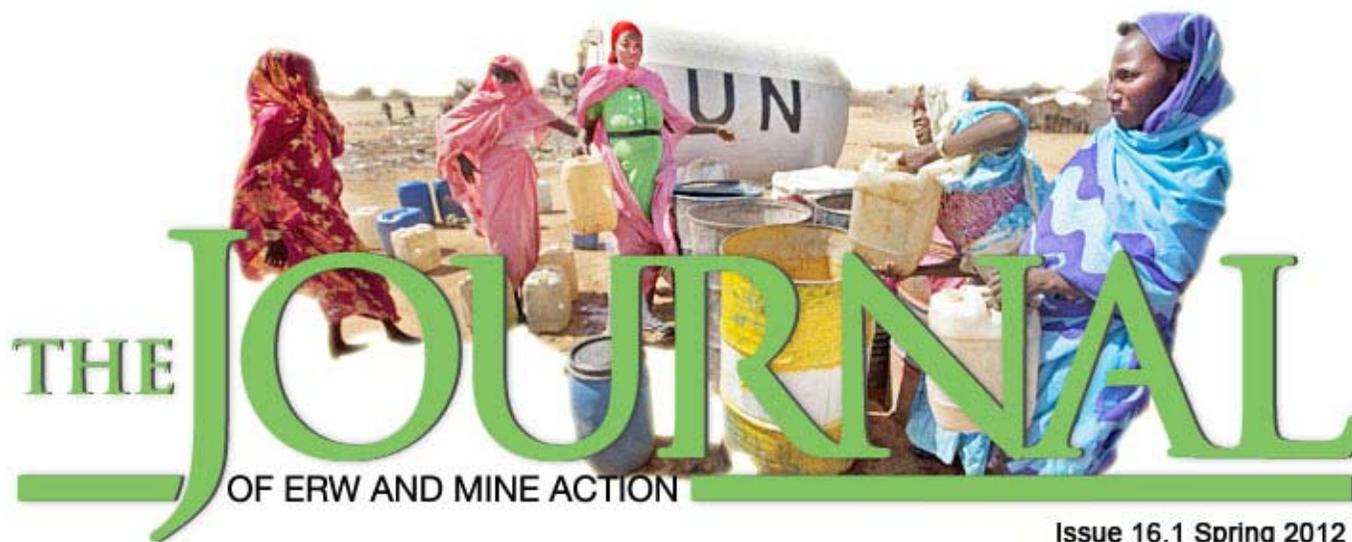
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Of Water and War: The Delicate Relationship Between Water Scarcity and Conflict

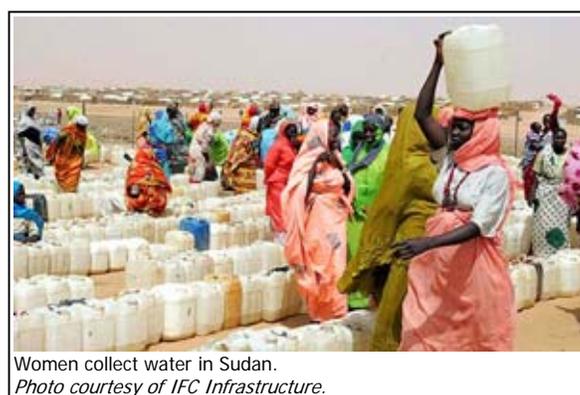
Is it possible that the wars of the future could be fought over water, the most abundant natural resource on the planet? The following article explores the relationship between water, conflict and landmine-clearance efforts around the globe.

The 2008 documentary *Blue Gold: World Water Wars* drew attention to the blossoming issue of global water scarcity, asserting that the “wars of the future will be fought over water as they are over oil today.”¹ Though a big claim, water scarcity requires world attention because, in addition to creating conflicts itself, conflicts also increase water scarcity. Landmines and other explosive weaponry not only accelerate soil erosion “leading to the depletion of soil fertility,” they also increase water pollution and make access to clean drinking water more difficult and, at times, dangerous.²

Water scarcity is not a new issue. Target 7.C of the United Nations Millennium Development Declaration, established in 2000, is to “halve, by 2015, the proportion of the [world] population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.”³ According to *Landmines Blow!*, “between 1990 and 2004, more than 1.2 billion people gained access to an improved source of drinking water,” which means the world is on track to meet this goal. The knowledge of challenges to come, however, tempers this recognition. In order for Target 7.C to be met, “a further 1.1 billion people will need to gain access by 2015.”⁴

Though water scarcity is the result of varied factors, at the forefront is climate change leading to desertification. Climate change is a hotly-debated issue, but arguments usually center around the degree to which human industries influence climate, not whether the change is actually occurring. (If you’re still not convinced, read *The Guardian* article in which leading scientists from all over the world confirm global warming through “temperature measurements... [and] observations such as rising sea levels, retreating snow cover and glaciers, longer growing seasons and shifting wildlife.”⁵)

Desertification, or the transformation of fertile, agricultural land into desert, is amplified by human practices such as deforestation, overgrazing and improper irrigation. In addition to hampering agricultural yield, desertification leads to dramatic reductions in clean water. In the past year, as climate change caused erratic rainfall patterns, Sudan struggled with desertification.



Women collect water in Sudan.
Photo courtesy of IFC Infrastructure.

Floods and droughts led to the need for repeated plantings, creating a scarcity of food and water resources that cause even “more tension between traditionally hostile groups” in the country.⁶



Women collect water from a tank installed by the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan, near their team site in Khor Abeche, South Darfur. The women are part of a community of displaced Sudanese who settled in the area after fleeing violence in their native Darfur villages. *Photo courtesy of U.N./Albert Gonzalez Farran.*

However, conflicts arising from water scarcity are not unique to Sudan: “Africa is the continent most vulnerable to climate change, because of its vastness, its poverty and its diversity,” and, because of the limited resources possessed by its population, conflict is an inevitable result.⁶ Sana’a, Yemen currently faces a water crisis that could eclipse all others. In as little as 20 years, the city’s water supply could be completely exhausted, and many western governments fear that the instability rising from this development might make Sana’a a terrorist recruitment site for groups like al-Qaida.⁷

Worst of all, conflicts that develop due to water scarcity tend to lead to more resource issues, creating a cycle of destruction. The Congo Wars (August 1998–April 2004) displaced millions of refugees from Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, and only 45 percent of them had access to clean drinking water. During the Eritrean-Ethiopian War (May 1998–June 2000), severe drought brought on a famine that the respective governments could not confront due to the

economic demands of war.⁸ In wars like these, water infrastructure often is destroyed, and chemicals and debris left by explosives frequently pollute the rivers. As a result, civilians seek new water sources, and many are maimed or killed when they venture into areas contaminated by landmines.

In the shadow of a looming world water crisis, the work of mine-action organizations around the world is more crucial than ever. In addition to ensuring safe passage to travelers seeking clean water, landmine clearance leads to increased agricultural production and stronger, water-retaining soils that combat runoff, erosion and desertification. Furthermore, by providing access to crops and clean water, landmine clearance decreases conflict, beginning a new cycle—a cycle of creation—that could help bring even the most affected communities out of poverty and conflict. Water scarcity is not a new issue, but if future wars really will be fought over water, it is an issue that should be at the forefront as mine action moves forward. ↴

~ Dan Baker, CISR staff

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Endnotes

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