

CRISIS: 'WE ARE ... RUNNING OUT OF CLEAN WATER'

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By ERIN ANDERSEN

OTTAWA -- "What does it take to frighten people?" Maude Barlow wonders.

She rattles off a grim list of worries, barely pausing for breath: water supplies in Africa guarded by dogs and chain-link fences while families go thirsty, the vital Murray-Darling Basin in southeast Australia crumbling into desert, the mighty Colorado River in the United States drying up to a trickle.

"The water crisis is deepening everywhere," sighs the 61-year-old activist and head of the Council of Canadians, who has tasted tear gas and faced down stun guns in defence of universal access to clean water. What scares her most is that the problem will not get fixed for her grandchildren.

This week, Ms. Barlow was named senior adviser to the United Nations on water issues - a new position created by General Assembly president Miguel d'Escoto, who raised the subject of water as a human right in his first UN speech in September. Ms. Barlow, who has been meeting with Mr. d'Escoto unofficially since August, agreed to take the position without pay.

"With my heart and soul, I believe it is the single most important environmental and human-rights threat of our time, and it's the one hitting now," she says on the telephone from Winnipeg, where she was attending a conference. "There is nothing 'in the future' about this [issue]."

Raised in Digby, N.S., where her father was the town's first social worker, Ms. Barlow has become a prominent opponent of the privatization of water - a June article in the Australian newspaper *The Age* said she was "to H₂O what Al Gore is to CO₂" - but she first made her name in Canada as an outspoken activist fighting the North American free trade agreement. She received more than her share of criticism, and her more dire predictions have not come true, but on that subject she has a practised answer: "My mother used to tell me, 'Serious people make serious enemies.'"

And Ms. Barlow is nothing if not serious. She has written 15 books - her most recent, *Blue Covenant*, on the global water crisis, was published last year. She travels continually and not, as one colleague pointed out, on luxury junkets. While her calendar is swamped with speaking engagements, she is not one to linger at conference centres.

"She is just tireless," says Wenonah Hauter, the executive director of Food & Water Watch, an organization Ms. Barlow chairs.

In India, Ms. Hauter recalls, Ms. Barlow sat for two days in a small village with mothers who were holding a silent vigil to protest against a Coca-Cola plant that was siphoning off their water to bottle it. She was tear-gassed during an anti-globalization rally at the World Trade Organization meeting in Hong Kong in 2005.

In Johannesburg, water services have been privatized, prepaid meters have been installed by the French company Suez, and the supply cut off to those who can't afford to pay. When local townships formed a protest march, Ms. Barlow and her staff moved to the front of the line, hoping to deter the police from using stun guns. A few days later in the Orange Farm township, she confronted some visiting Suez executives, who eventually hopped back on their bus and left without taking their tour.

This is the same doggedness that Ms. Barlow now vows to bring to her new post at the United Nations, where her main focus will be developing a new convention that sees water not as "a commodity to be sold on the open market like running shoes," but as a public resource held in trust by the government and provided as a human right to its citizens.

She says issues around water cover all the areas she feels most passionately about: gender, poverty, the environment, social justice. She describes returning from a trip in which she visited Nairobi's huge Kibera slum, where people use "flying toilets" (you defecate into a plastic bag and throw it in the street), and counting up her faucets and water lines in her Ottawa home. "I could turn them all on and run them for days, and nobody would say a word. We just take it for granted."

When she began studying the politics of water, she had to unlearn much of what she had been taught about the resource - beginning with the idea that it is infinitely renewable and that Canada is overflowing with it.

"We are a planet running out of clean water," she says. "We all learned that couldn't happen back in Grade 6. But it is happening."

And she notes that many Canadians still believe that their country has 20 per cent of the world's water supply and is therefore safe from shortages. (In fact, scientists now say Canada holds closer to 7 per cent of the planet's fresh water, and much of that is too far north to be accessible.)

Consider the ready examples that belie our myth of abundance, she says: The Great Lakes are becoming increasingly polluted as their water levels fall, many aboriginal communities have limited access to drinking water and the oil-sands expansion continues to damage the ecosystem of northern Alberta.

Meanwhile, Canadians rank among the biggest per-capita users of water in the world. "We treat our water badly," Ms. Barlow sighs.

But while the battle for a UN convention declaring water access a human right, similar to freedom of assembly and speech, will probably be long, she has reason to be hopeful.

After four years of silent vigil, the women in India managed to get their case against Coca-Cola to court and its plant was closed. As quickly as bottled water became a fad in the West, it is now becoming a faux pas; for instance, cities such as London have banned its use at municipal functions and many schools in Canada have stopped stocking it.

Blue Covenant opens with a disaster scenario: a future world where the poor continue to die from dirty water, corporations have made water a luxury of the rich and climate change is ravaging the land. Asked whether she is optimistic that the world can act in time, Ms. Barlow offers the only answer, perhaps, that a woman with four grandchildren can give: "We have to have the courage to see the crisis as it is. But anyone who knows me will tell you, I was born with a smile on my face."

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In deep water

1.1 billion people have no access to clean drinking water.

The World Health Organization has found that contaminated water contributes to 80 per cent of all sickness and disease worldwide. Half of the world's hospital beds are occupied by people with an easily preventable waterborne disease.

In China, 80 per cent of major rivers are so polluted that they no longer support aquatic life.

By 2050, based on a population growth of three billion people, humans will need an 80-per-cent increase in water supplies to feed themselves.

In 2006, 200 billion litres of bottled water were consumed globally - a 200-per-cent increase since the 1970s.

For the price of one bottle of Evian, the average North American could buy

roughly 4,000 litres of tap water.

Less than 5 per cent of plastic bottles around the world are recycled.

Source: Blue Covenant: the Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water, by Maude Barlow