

## **Fourth World Water Forum and In Defense of Water Forum Offer Contrasting Views on Water in Mexico City**

The farmers of Guerrero, Mexico—men, women and youth—one after another filed up steep concrete stairs into the balcony of the trade union auditorium. Sandal footed, cotton dresses, pants and shirts, straw hats upon heads, smelling of fresh soil and water these participants at the people's International Forum in Defense of Water personified the world concern for water.

The hundreds of people from Guerrero, who took the day away from their fields, drew attention to the controversial La Parota hydroelectric dam in Guerrero state, which intends to bring electricity to a wide area in western Mexico, including Acapulco. The project involves flooding 17,000 hectares, directly affecting communities.

The stories witnessed by people of Mexico, South Africa, Bolivia, Argentina, India, the Philippines, Italy, Canada, and many other countries spoke of the critical concerns of privatization, bottled water and degradation of water throughout the world. Unlike the official World Water Forum held across the city at Centro Banamex organized by the World Water Council from March 16-22. The parallel conference showcased the human right to water and protection of ecosystems in light of controversial privatization and private public partnerships.

The official Fourth World Water Forum organized by the World Water Council (WWC) and attended by thousands of government officials, hydrologists, engineers and business representatives from 148 countries considered a number of solutions to a pending global water crisis, but the most controversial issues were discussed, and marched for on the streets outside the Centro Banamex.

The WWC created in 1996 in response increasing concerns about global water issues states their mission as "Providing a platform to encourage debates and exchanges of experience, the Council aims to reach a common strategic vision on water resources and water services management amongst all stakeholders in the water community."

In Mexico City it was evident that many of the corporate privatization efforts have failed and new strategies are being sought including public private partnerships. Water-rights advocate Maude Barlow, honorary president of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Council of Canadians and author of *Blue Gold*, believes the World Water Forums have done little to improve the global water situation and have tended to promote a capitalist, infrastructure-oriented model rather than a grassroots approach. "The WWC is dominated by the World Bank, the large corporations, and the water ministries from the First World," she said. Multinationals including Coca Cola, Danone, Nestle, PepsiCo, and Suez assisted in sponsorship of the World Water Forum.

Daughters of Charity Isabel Fierro, Mary Rogers, Patricia Dunne and Franciscan Joan Brown attended the meetings in Mexico City to offer solidarity for the Hopi Villages who commissioned runners for a sacred run from Hopi land, Arizona to Mexico City. The group of sisters also promoted, and distributed the Interfaith Statement to the 4<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum on *Water: Essential for Justice and Peace*.

The document was signed by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Hopi Villages, and the Public Life and Social Policy Office Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Joan Brown,osf, took part in an international panel composed of people from India, Bolivia, Canada, South Africa and an indigenous representative. The panel, sponsored by the International Forum on Defense of Water at the official forum, allowed an opportunity for a presentation of concerns of faith communities and to make public the document which received much affirmation and interest.

The myriads of information and masses of humanity present at both forums and at the first International People's March for Water that stopped traffic with 15,000 people in the streets of Mexico City form indelible images of a global concern for life giving water that grows deeper each day.

The final ministerial declaration of the 4<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum reaffirmed a commitment to water, but did not make water a human right stating that this could generate legal problems at national and international levels. Approximately 26 nations worldwide have placed water as a human right within their constitutions or other governmental documents. Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela were not in agreement with the official declaration, stating that access to water is a fundamental human right and expressing deep concerns over negative impacts of free trade and investment agreements on water resources.

The Forum did state that water is “guarantee of life for all of the world's people,” which the organizers believe demonstrates sincere concern by governments. The document also states that water and sanitation services must be considered top priority in development policies.

In contrast, the final declaration of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared that access to water is a fundamental human right. Director-General Koichiro Matsuura said that nations that are signatories to U.N. treaties have a “moral obligation” to consider water a human right.

According to the “Joint Declaration of Movements in Defense of Water,” which was adopted by the civil meeting, International Forum, In Defense of Water signed by 300 non-governmental organizations from 40 countries, water is a “common good” and access to water is an essential and inalienable right. The “Joint Declaration” states that water is not merchandise, which is why the signers reject all forms of privatization, even public-private partnerships, for which there is evidence of failure throughout the world.