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March 20, 2003 6:14 a.m. EST

FROM THE ARCHIVES: March 20, 2003

Intl Panel Head: Nations Must Focus On Water Problems

DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

KYOTO (AP)--All people on earth can have clean water by 2025, but governments must pay more attention and spend more money on massive problems of supply and sanitation, a former chief of the International Monetary Fund told an international conference Thursday.

"It is daunting but feasible," said Michel Camdessus, a ex-IMF managing director who headed a finance panel at the World Water Forum.

Currently, US\$80 billion a year is spent on improving water services for the world's poor.

But in its report, the panel estimated that at least US\$100 billion more was needed.

To help keep track of the spending and progress, it proposed setting up a new U.N. agency specializing in water.

In a 50-page report, the panel recommended international and regional financial institutions and donors join nongovernment organizations, municipal governments and communities to coordinate investment and aid.

Much of the money should go to improving sanitation, it said.

It also encouraged developing countries to devise policies and regulations to lure a mix of public and private funds and expertise. The wealthy should be charged more for their water to subsidize the poor.

Those recommendations are likely to form the basis of a statement issued by top government ministers from 165 nations Sunday, when the weeklong international conference ends.

Eight major industrialized nations - including France, the U.S., Germany, Britain, Italy, Japan, Canada and Russia - are likely to endorse the plan at a June summit at France's famous spa city, Evian.

Activists immediately dismissed the report. A statement signed by a bloc of 260 environmental and other groups declared that access to safe water is a human right. They oppose private ownership of water services.

"The management of water services must not only remain in public hands but must be revitalized

and strengthened to make community and worker participation central," it said.

The U.N. has set a target of reducing by half the number of people without access to water or sanitation - estimated at more than 3 billion - by 2015, and the remainder by 2025.

Without action, climate changes and population growth could leave as many as 7 billion people in 60 countries facing a water shortage by 2050, when the world's population is expected to reach 9.3 billion.

The U.S.-led attack on Iraq has raised questions about whether the water forum will continue.

The Iraqi delegation has returned home and several heads of state, including French President Jacques Chirac and U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, canceled to focus on gridlock in the U.N. over how to deal with Iraq.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi will sending a proxy to chair the final day sessions, her ministry said.

But Camdessus said the conference would go on. He stressed the world should focus on the poor in Africa and Asia and Latin America, who were caught in a struggle of much greater proportions against water scarcity, poverty and disease.

Web site:

The Third World Water Forum: <http://www.worldwaterforum.org> -Edited by Mary de

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http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,BT_CO_20030320_002156,00.html

Updated March 20, 2003 6:14 a.m.

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