

FEATURES

Planet's poorest suffer greatly from lack of clean water

By Scott Canon and Shashank Bengali
MCT WIRE SERVICE

HARBEL, Liberia

The quiet, thin 19-year-old is up before 7 a.m. each day to walk about a quarter-mile to a well. Patience Yarkpawolo totes water for her entire family in the household's sole 6-gallon bucket. The water must last the day for cooking, cleaning, washing and drinking. For seven people.

Although the town's well is chlorinated twice a month, Yarkpawolo suspects that's not often enough. Her twin 4-year-old sisters often suffer upset stomachs and diarrhea, illnesses she blames partly on the water supply.

"Somehow, they are always getting sick," she said. "We don't know exactly what is the reason. But we are not so sure about the water in the well." The West African nation has been beset by two decades of civil war and political upheaval that left most of the country's 3.5 million souls to rely on crude wells and boreholes.

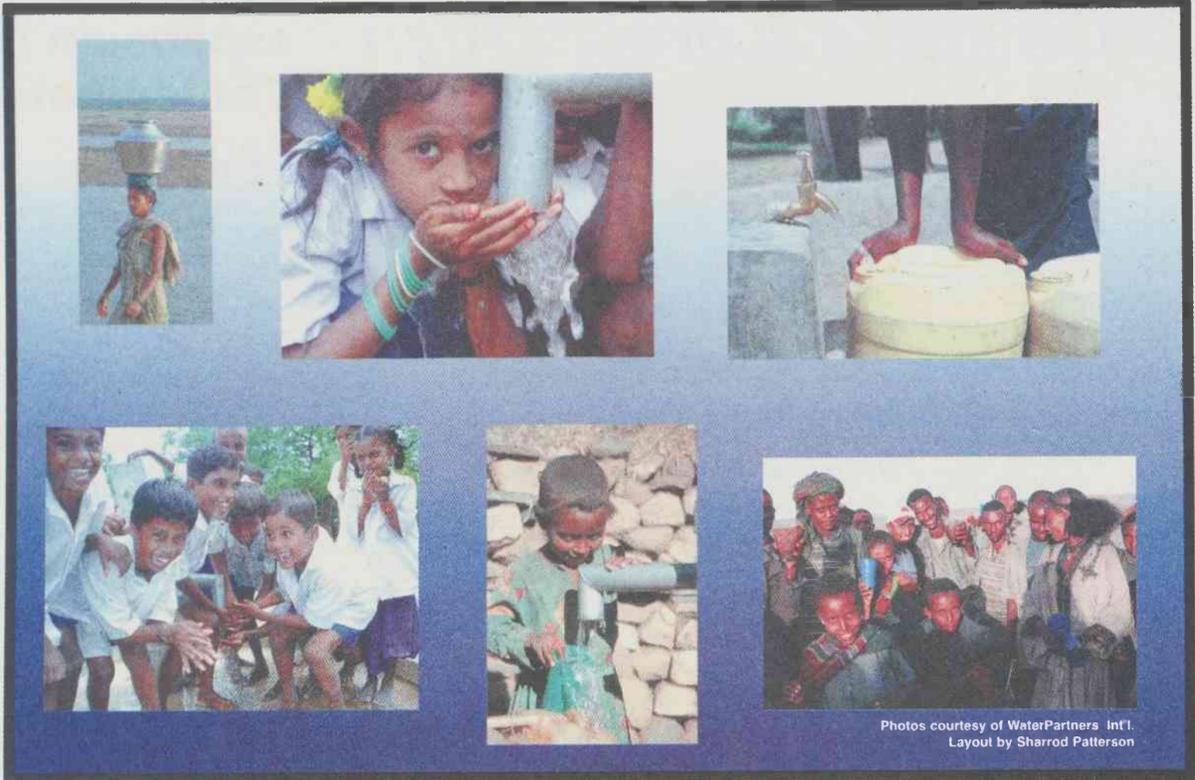
Sometimes the cause is war, sometimes just crushing poverty, but the lack of clean water hits the planet's poorest people like nothing else.

"Nothing can more fundamentally change people's lives than a supply of safe water," said Gary White, who heads the Kansas City, Mo.-based WaterPartners International. "We take it for granted when we turn on the tap. That's not life for everybody."

A recent United Nations report declared a global water crisis as the world's chief barrier to lifting entire regions out of poverty and identified the absence of clean water as a sure predictor of shortened life expectancy.

And the report's authors said countries rich and poor are doing far too little to fix the problem, investing much more in guns than in plumbing. It noted that more is spent on mineral water on the dining tables of the wealthy than for passable drinking water for the destitute.

There is some progress. The World Health Organization has had success in pleading with



Photos courtesy of WaterPartners Int'l.
Layout by Sharrod Patterson

In many parts of the world, getting the water needed for drinking and other uses is not just a matter of turning on a faucet. The lack of clean water causes sickness and death in developing nations.

poor families to put a few drops of bleach into their household water supplies, an ad hoc but effective way to keep bacteria in check. A new \$3 filtering straw can be worn around the neck and lasts for a year.

"Development doesn't happen unless you have clean drinking water and sanitation. There's no getting around it," said David

Douglas, president of Water Advocates, which lobbies on the issue.

Dirty water is expensive. The U.N. estimates the economic toll — lost labor, added medical bills, girls kept from school so they can carry water — at \$38 billion a year. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, the cost is guessed at \$15 billion, equal to 60 percent of international aid flowing to the region.

Sometimes, the solution lies simply in smarts. Water fixes need to fit the locale.

A U.N. report issued in September concluded that unclean water is a greater danger to life than war. And it faulted both rich and poor countries for doing too little about the problem.

"It's such a solvable problem," said John Kayser, a spokesman for Water for People. "We're just not spending enough money."

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