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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT

S Asia needs regional deal for transboundary water sharing

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Guests hold copies of the report on 'Water as a criterion for human development in South Asia' at BRAC University in Dhaka on Monday. — New Age photo

A regional human development report on Monday said the South Asian nations needed regional approach instead of going for unilateral or bilateral mechanism for transboundary water sharing.

Focusing on water for human development, a panel of experts from Pakistan-based Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre in its annual report found that South Asia was at a critical juncture with respect to its water resources.

The 'Human Development in South Asia 2013' report said that the region was already facing water shortage due to population growth, rapid urbanisation, faster industrialisation and poor water management and the changing climate would aggravate the situation further.

'The region needs collaborative mechanisms for reducing trust deficit, forging robust water sharing treaties and overseeing projects that are contentious,' said the report launched at BRAC Centre Inn Auditorium by the Institute of Governance Studies of BRAC University in Dhaka.

The report said that 54 rivers, including the three large rivers are shared between India and Bangladesh but there was only one international water treaty between them, the Ganges Treaty of 1996.

It said that Teesta River was another source of conflict between India and Bangladesh. The hydro-politics of India and Bangladesh is complex and it is a challenge for water management in both the countries, said the report.

It said that transboundary waters management needed cooperation not just between India and Bangladesh, but it also needed to include Nepal, Bhutan and China in the collaborative basin management.

The report said that despite the existence of many transboundary rivers flowing through South Asia, the region was only able to secure five major water sharing agreements between riparian countries. Food security has also become a problem for South Asian countries relying on agriculture as economic growth driver and more importantly for food production, the report said.

It said that climate change would also exacerbate stresses on water resources in South Asia by affecting water quality, quantity, demand, security and transboundary issues. Addressing the report launching ceremony, BRAC university vice-chancellor Ainun Nishat suggested regional approach to end transboundary conflict on water.

Bangladesh still does not think that access to safe drinking water is an element of human rights, he observed.

People's access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation is a fundamental part of human development and is a major challenge that South Asian countries need to overcome, said former University Grants Commission chairman Nazrul Islam.

Centre for Policy Dialogue distinguished fellow Debapriya Bhattacharya said that in water issue the progress of Bangladesh was slow though there were some countries in South Asia who were performing much better.

He said that 83 per cent population were now getting safe drinking water in Bangladesh and 55 per cent had basic sanitation facilities though in Sri Lanka 93 per cent people got safe drinking water facilities and 91 per cent got basic sanitation.

Former health secretary AMM Nasir Uddin, former finance minister M Syeduzzaman and IGS executive director Sultan Hafeez Rahman also spoke.