

U.N.: Lack of sanitation has human cost

By CLARE NULLIS, Associated Press Writer Sun Nov 12, 3:09 AM ET

The humble flush toilet, taken for granted in most rich countries, could be a cheap but powerful tool to reduce childhood deaths and boost global development, a U.N. report said Thursday.

The annual report of the U.N. Development Program said that lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation killed nearly 2 million young children each year. This amounted to nearly 5,000 deaths per day, most of them preventable, and made diarrhea the second biggest childhood killer.

"No access to sanitation is a polite way of saying that people draw water for drinking, cooking and washing from rivers, lakes, ditches and drains fouled with human and animal excrement," said Kevin Watkins, the main author.

"The toilet may seem an unlikely catalyst for human development, but the report provides abundant and powerful evidence to show how it benefits people's well being," he said.

The report cited Peruvian studies that the installation of a flush toilet in the home increased by almost 60 percent the chances of a child surviving to the first birthday and in Egypt by 57 percent.

The report, "Beyond scarcity: Power, politics and the global water crisis" painted a grim picture of global imbalances and the low political priority accorded to safe drinking water and sanitation.

"Dripping taps in rich countries lose more water than is available each day to more than 1 billion people," it said.

The report called for a global campaign similar to the Global Fund against AIDS, TB and malaria to try to coordinate all the fragmented efforts of different agencies working with water.

Watkins said rich countries needed to show more political leadership and follow through on promises to implement an action plan on water made at the G-8 summit in France three years ago.

"What we've seen since then is no action and no plan. It's not even on the radar screen of donor countries and we need to get it there."

But the report also criticized developing countries for spending too little on water and sanitation.

Most sub-Saharan African countries normally spend 0.2-0.4 percent of budget on water and sanitation. In Ethiopia the military budget was 10 times the water and sanitation budget and in Pakistan 47 times, it said.

The report said two out of three people in South Asia lack basic sanitation, numbers that put the region on a par with sub-Saharan Africa.

The report said the \$10 billion price tag to achieve U.N. goals on increasing access to water and sanitation should be put in context. "It represents less than five days worth of global military spending and less than half what rich countries spend each year on mineral water."