

22 March 2011

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Joseph Deiss,  
President of the 65<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Side Event on “Water Challenges and Problems for Cities” on  
World Water Day**

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to join you today in celebration of the World Water Day.

Water is an issue, which I feel very close to. My hometown in Switzerland, Fribourg, is located on both sides of the Sarine River. The River not only gave to the site its very specific and beautiful landscape, but in the Middle Ages it also provided the natural resources and transportation needed to develop a vibrant textile industry. Nowadays, the Sarine River, next to being a source of recreational activities, is a source of renewable energy, with several hydroelectric plants installed along its banks.

All over the world, societies have been built around streams, lakes, rivers and oceans. Water can be destructive, as recently witnessed with the tsunami in Japan, the floods in Pakistan and Haiti and mudslides in Brazil to give just a few tragic examples, but water is first and foremost generous. Water is at the origin of life. Each one of us depends on freshwater for daily survival. Our wellbeing and economic growth depend on the health of the water systems.

However, the combined challenges of climate change, rapid population growth, urbanization and industrialization are putting increasing stress on the availability and quality of water.

Globally, more than a billion people lack access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. In many countries, efforts need to be significantly increased to reach the Millennium Development Goals on environmental sustainability. Diseases like cholera and diarrhea, which are closely associated with contaminated water and poor sanitation and could be easily prevented, still cause far too many deaths.

Will we have enough water to meet our multifaceted needs? In transboundary areas, competition and conflict over water are not unusual. Let us not add water shortage to the too many causes for conflict.

The International Decade for Action, Water for Life, 2005-2015, demonstrates the political will of Member States to translate their collective recognition on the importance of water to action; action to achieve internationally agreed water-related goals, including the Millennium Development Goals on environmental sustainability.

Today's event is one of the many activities taking place around the world on the occasion of the World Water Day to promote conservation, protection and sustainable management of water.

It is particularly welcome that today's discussion focuses on water in the context of cities. The General Assembly recently convened a Thematic Debate on Disaster Risk Reduction, where we specifically discussed the challenges of preventing and managing risks in cities. I believe that some of our conclusions can usefully feed into today's discussion.

As I just said, my hometown developed along a river, as so many other cities did. With about half of the world's population already living in cities and urbanization still gathering pace, the relationship between cities and water becomes ever more critical.

What would our future cities look like when there is no water? When there is only unclean water? As an economist, I cannot help but recall that the founding father of our science, Adam Smith, spoke of the paradox of water and diamond, where water, while extremely useful was available in such quantities, that it was available for free. Times have changed. We must develop strategies for preserving and better managing this priceless resource.

I am confident that our discussion will help raise awareness on the urgency of such questions. I encourage you to share experiences and best practices to address the reciprocal challenges of water and cities creatively and effectively. I wish you fruitful exchanges.