

25 July 2017

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Dear friends and colleagues,

As 2017 presses on and we pass the half-way mark, I am happy to be back informing you of my activities over the past few months and what can be expected for the rest of the year. The following are the main topics I will be discussing, for your ease of navigation.

- My contribution to World Water Day
- Mission to Mexico (May 2017)
- Expert consultation: reports for the UN Human Rights Council & General Assembly
- The mandate in the news
- World Water Week
- Mission to India (Nov 2017)
- World Water Forum
- New reports for 2018

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My contribution to World Water Day

Since 1993, World Water Day is celebrated on March 22. On this year's World Water Day, I released a [statement](#) on the importance of development cooperation for the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation. I also launched a series of videos on the human rights to water and sanitation. They were recorded in English, Spanish and Portuguese (all subtitled in English) and are available on the YouTube channel of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Watch and share!

- [Describing the scope of my mandate as UN Special Rapporteur](#)
- [On the human right to water](#)
- [On the human right to sanitation](#)
- [Discussing human rights and the SDGs](#)



The theme of water and sanitation has a rather central importance throughout the Agenda's different goals and targets.

[Special Rapporteur discusses human rights and the SDGs](#)

Mission to Mexico

From 2 to 12 May, I conducted an official visit to Mexico at the invitation of the country's government. One intense day after another, meeting with a diversity of actors and travelling to several locations throughout Mexico, I was able to make an assessment of people's access to water supply and sanitation services in the country.

I spoke with representatives of the Federal Government, State and Municipal authorities, members of civil society organizations working on water, sanitation and human rights, as well as numerous residents. I visited marginalized communities within Mexico City and also travelled to the State of Mexico, Veracruz and Chiapas, where I was able to witness the conditions of unequal access that afflict indigenous and rural populations, as well as people that live in informal settlements.

Although the human rights to water and sanitation were explicitly recognized in Mexico's federal constitution in 2012, repeated attempts to pass new legislation for the water and sanitation sector have proven unsuccessful. This is important as it means service providers and state institutions are still holding themselves to standards that do not necessarily reflect the standards and principles of the human rights to water and sanitation.

At the same time, in many parts of the country, such as a community that I visited in Chiapas, essential infrastructure such as wastewater treatment plants have been abandoned and left in disrepair. Absence of adequate water and sanitation services is a very concerning issue in Mexico, especially for indigenous peoples and dispersed rural or peri-urban populations.

A short statement on my observations in Mexico is available [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

And a slightly longer read is also available [English](#) and [Spanish](#).



Special Rapporteur meets with civil society organizations in Mexico (May 2017)

Expert consultation: Reports for the UN Human Rights Council & General Assembly

On 22-24 May, two consultations were organized in Rio de Janeiro with small groups of experts to receive input on the subjects addressed in the upcoming reports to the Human Rights Council and General Assembly. The reports focus on the human rights to water and sanitation in connection with service regulation and development cooperation, respectively. The sixteen experts – from Africa, Europe, North America and South America with experience in service regulation, public utility management, development cooperation and human rights – discussed key elements for each of the reports and provided valuable perspectives based on their experiences in the water and sanitation sector. Both reports were finalized in the months following and I will present each of them at the next meeting of the respective bodies: the 36th meeting of the Human Rights Council (September 2017) and the 72nd meeting of the General Assembly (October 2017).

The mandate in the news

On several occasions this year, urgent attention has been required to protect the human rights to water and sanitation. Some notable cases in which I was involved are listed below:

- **Yemen** (16 June 2017) - The Special Rapporteur on the human right to health, Dainius Pūras, and myself [urged Yemen and the international community to solve Yemen's water crisis](#) to halt the spiralling cholera outbreak in the country. Grappling with an ongoing conflict that has led to the deterioration of water and sanitation infrastructure in Yemen, as of 16 June, upwards of 135,000 people were feared to have contracted the water-borne disease and more than 950 people had died of it. As of July 1, the [World Health Organisation reported](#) that the death toll had surpassed 1,500. Welcoming the efforts being made to mitigate the outbreak, it is critically important to address the underlying problem of unsafe water supplies, which has a negative impact on the enjoyment of the right to health by the population, in particular children and those in most vulnerable situations. I continue to urge all stakeholders to strengthen the initiatives to build and repair infrastructure and to improve access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Earlier this year, Special Rapporteur Dainius Pūras and I contacted the Government of Yemen to seek clarification about this situation. Furthermore, in April 2017, [UN experts urged an end to the conflict and blockade](#), warning that the deliberate starvation of civilians may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity.



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Urging all stakeholders to strengthen initiatives for access to safe water & sanitation. For [#humanrights](#) in [#Yemen](#)> bit.ly/2swTVBf



<https://twitter.com/SRWatSan/status/875702375209734145>

- **Gaza** (12 June 2017) - I joined several UN human rights experts in calling on the relevant authorities to take necessary measures to alleviate the deepening humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Longstanding power shortages have had serious impacts on the human rights of Gaza's two million residents, affecting hospital conditions, exacerbating water shortages, and provoking greater dumping of untreated sewage into the Mediterranean Sea. Those

residents' suffering represents "a complete failure of all parties to uphold their fundamental human rights obligations, including the inalienable right to life." Read the UN experts' full statement [here](#).

- **Nigeria** – (27 February 2017) - [I released a press statement raising serious concerns](#) about the Lagos Environmental Bill, which proposed to effectively make it a crime to fetch water from natural sources (e.g. rivers and lakes). I also made [contact](#) with the government to inquire about the bill and its provisions. Shockingly, the bill proposal came only months after I [contacted the government](#) to request information regarding the megacity's worrying conditions of access to water and sanitation for its more than 20 million residents, and mere weeks after [I urged authorities](#) in Lagos to ensure that the State budget would improve funding for water and sanitation services. Fortunately, the final legislation that was passed by the State House of Assembly in May 2017 excluded several harmful provisions. For example, fetching water from natural sources was not made a punishable offence, which would have affected many residents who obtain water that way in the absence of formal services. This case was particularly helpful to show the weight that Special Rapporteurs, together with an active civil society, can have on influencing governments to fulfil their human rights obligations. However, the Nigerian government has still not replied to the official communications that were sent to them to request further information.
- **Myanmar (9 January 2017)** – Special Rapporteurs including myself contacted the government of Myanmar to draw attention to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the country's northern Rakhine State. The Rohingya population living in that region (estimated at 800,000) have been particularly affected by the action of security forces undertaking "clearance operations" after Border Guard Police posts suffered attacks in October 2016. As those people's freedom of movement was increasingly restricted, their access to basic services including water and sanitation was also severely curtailed, creating impacts on hygiene and health. The government has not yet responded to our request for information.
- **Colombia (22 December 2016)** – I joined several Special Rapporteurs in calling on the Colombian government to address the long-standing conditions affecting the rights of the indigenous Wayúu population in the northern department La Guajira. The Wayúu, living mostly in rural and peri-urban areas, are composed of at least 300,000 people, making them the most populous indigenous community in Colombia. Since 2014, sources of water traditionally used by Wayúu have dried up and left the population without safe access to water for personal and domestic use. In addition, the water available in La Guajira for use by the Wayúu population, especially in rural areas of La Guajira, has been verified as presenting high risk in water quality tests.
 - On 27 February 2017, the [Colombian government responded](#) describing the measures that have been taken to address these human rights concerns.

World Water Week

In the last week of August 2017, Stockholm is hosting [World Water Week](#) with the theme "water and waste – reduce and reuse".

On 25-26 August, I will be attending the UN Water meeting. On 27 August, I will be participating in two events:

1. As keynote speaker in the day's second session, speaking on "Participation as key to gender equality in rights to water and sanitation" in the seminar "Understanding the gender dimension of water and waste". For more details: <http://programme.worldwaterweek.org/event/7454>
2. As participant in a dynamic exchange of practical experiences on the implementation of the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation and SDG6 monitoring. This event will gather development partners, including regional bodies (IDB, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights), civil society (ONGAWA, WaterLex), agencies (AECID, COSUDE) and governments. For more details: <http://programme.worldwaterweek.org/event/7123>

Mission to India

To fulfil the requirements of my mandate as Special Rapporteur as determined by the UN Human Rights Council, I will undertake an official visit to India from 30 October to 10 November 2017. Civil society, human rights activists and other interested parties are encouraged to submit input. Please find complete details on how to submit information [here](#).

World Water Forum 2018

In March 2018, the World Water Forum will be taking place in Brasília. The Forum is a decades-old, triannual event that brings together relevant decision makers with respect to water-related issues to raise awareness on the water sector. However, on many occasions the event has been subject to critique by civil society groups who often claim that a plurality of interests is not represented at the Forum. In that line, groups from Brazil and around the world have started organizing an Alternative World Water Forum that will take place in Brasilia in the same period.

To date, human rights have largely not been on the agenda of the World Water Forum. The Alternative World Water Forum, on the other hand, has explicitly expressed a priority focus on water as a human right. In March 2018, it will be important to see if both events finally demonstrate visions of water that dialogue with human rights. It would be opportune for the World Water Forum to adopt such a focus as it will be the first to take place in the SDGs era. I will be sure to keep you abreast of further developments as the date approaches.

New reports for 2018

I have officially chosen the subjects of focus for next year's reports to the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly. The report for the General Assembly will address the human rights to water and sanitation in situations of humanitarian crisis, including for refugees and migrants. The report for the Human Rights Council will address accountability and the human rights to water and sanitation. Additionally, I will be organizing a follow-up report on the country missions that have been performed by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water and sanitation.

Subscribe to the newsletter & follow the mandate

If you wish to receive this newsletter, please write to srwatsan@ohchr.org with the subject, "Subscription".

The [website of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) remains the number one place to discover the mandate's past and upcoming activities. There you can discover the role of the mandate; all thematic reports submitted by the mandate to the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council; a review of all country visits (now 20 total!); press releases where the mandate has used its voice to speak out against concerning human rights situations around the world; and a wide variety of informational tools and shareable media, available in multiple languages, aimed at educating, spreading awareness, and growing the stock of human rights defenders worldwide.

[Medium.com](#) is also being used by the mandate as a mobile-friendly platform to share select media, such as the variety of leaflets created by the mandate. Most of the material placed on Medium is available in English, French and Spanish!

The mandate is also present on major social media platforms [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) (@SRWatSan), where it actively engages with the global community on issues related to the human rights to water & sanitation.

Best wishes to all, hoping that human rights stay on everyone's agendas throughout the rest of the year.

Léo Heller

UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water & sanitation