

SATURDAY, JULY 10, 2010

"Wata, Wata, Plastik, Plastik"

The collapse of the Nile Basin Initiative talks concerning the waters of the Nile River, has reminded me of just how problematic such conversations can be, even when there are only two countries involved and there are no complicated colonial treaties. Whilst we were working in Porto in the mid 1990s, a 3 day Iberian Summit was held in the same city but despite both Spain and Portugal's concern on the issue of water, it was thought the subject was too divisive to be placed on the agenda. The numerous major river systems that cross Portugal, including the Douro and the Tejo, all rise in neighbouring Spain, seen at that time, as removing an excessive amount of water before it reached Portuguese territory.

Five East African countries have recently announced their refusal to go back on a deal they



signed last month

to share the waters of the

Nile, despite fierce criticism from Egypt and Sudan. Egypt is of course almost totally dependent on the waters of the Nile and, in addition to the threat of climate change, is also watching the construction of a hydroelectric dam in East Africa. Meanwhile Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya proceeded with the signing of an agreement in May, without the participation of their northern neighbours. The Nile Water Treaty, signed in 1929, is perceived as unjust, having been agreed during a period of colonial rule. Two other nations, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have yet to sign the deal and have so far refused to say whether they plan to so or not.



The weather in Freetown this past week has demonstrated just how wet the next few months are likely to be, with the capital only recently receiving the heavy rainfalls that most of Salone has been experiencing for several weeks. One exceptionally heavy thunderstorm coincided with the announcement that more than 50 water companies have responded to the government's requirement for certification and licensing from the Pharmacy Board of Sierra Leone for the selling of sachets of water. This is in response to a number of companies being found to be selling contaminated water. Supplies of piped water into the city are controlled by the Goma Valley Water Company from a reservoir in the nearby hills. However the infrastructure of the operation was designed in the 1960s for the capital's 400,000 people and today greater Freetown has more than three times that number of inhabitants.

Thirsty people require drinkable water wherever they are and that includes when on the city's



streets as well as in their homes, which generally have no piped water supply. The demand for this most precious of all liquids, results in huge quantities of water being sold in polythene bags that hold half a litre of "treated" water, which unlike Goma Valley water, is considered drinkable. It is not difficult to imagine what happens to discarded polythene bags as they are dispensed with by pedestrian and households

alike. Polythene bags quickly provide an impenetrable dam in storm water drains and result in flooding where it is least wanted, with the water packets that do escape the street gutters invariably end up in the sea and on neighbouring beaches.

A degree in environmental science is not required to conclude that water distribution in



Freetown is an ongoing disaster in search of catastrophe.

So when we heard of the Trashy Bag project from two USA mission partners who were in Ghana recently, we were all ears and cameras. (See: www.trashybags.org). The ingenious recycling of 90 polythene bags and sewing them into an attractive and sturdy shopping bag is a huge initiative and provides employment for 150 people and offers a potential, if small, solution to the discarded water packet problem. In Freetown a packet of water costs approximately 5p, but at 10p a litre that is great deal of money to individuals and impoverished communities who consequently have to resort to drinking water without the security of knowing its quality, so that typhoid and other water borne diseases are far too prevalent.

At a time when Salone and Freetown enjoys a more than generous rainfall the problems of the Nile Basin nations can seem far removed from daily living but the issues of water are always multi-dimensional be to the north or the south of the Sahara.