

## **When the Sahara was Green**

**October 10, 2007**

On October 10, the Center for Human Rights and International Justice co-sponsored a lecture given by Dr. Farouk El-Baz, *When the Sahara was Green*. Dr. Farouk El-Baz is the Director of the Boston University Center for Remote Sensing. His unique research utilizes remote satellite images to locate topographic water basins that can be used to provide water and agricultural resources to people in the dry areas of the Sahara. Dr. El-Baz stressed that the use of remote satellites have enabled geologists to investigate the topography of the desert by viewing the land from above, and has led to the discovery of untapped water sources in Egypt. El-Baz explained that the underground water basins exist because of the wet-dry cycles that occur in the desert belt. Due to a number of factors, the “desert” becomes arid and then wet at different intervals over time. As a result, the Sahara contains many rivers and streams beneath the sand. These large underground basins are now being used for agricultural development in Egypt. It is expected that the newly discovered basins will provide water for more than 150 thousand acres of land for at least 100 years.

The existence of untapped water sources has relevance for the humanitarian crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan, which, Dr. El-Baz explained, began as a conflict over lack of access to resources such as drinking water. According to El-Baz, there is a large lake, known as the Northern Darfur Mega Lake, beneath the surface of the region. Dr. El-Baz believes that this large lake, which is estimated to be the size of the state of Massachusetts, could provide drinking water for the people of Darfur in as little as three years. Dr. El-Baz emphasized that there is great hope in this resource because the geology of the land is extremely similar to the region in Egypt where his satellite discoveries have led to the tapping of water for agricultural purposes.

Dr. El-Baz has created the “1,000 Wells for Darfur Initiative,” which has already received attention from the United Nations and other international organizations. Dr. El-Baz emphasized that international organizations such as the United Nations would be needed to implement the project, due to its potential cost and political implications. He was optimistic, however, about the possibility of the Sudanese government assuming control of the wells after the system is installed and operational, a process which is expected to last approximately 10-20 years. In closing, Dr. El-Baz told the audience that, “Science is the search for truth and making it known to the people.” He hopes that this philosophy will be put into action as advanced satellite images and geologic techniques are employed to provide an invaluable resource to the people of Darfur.