S’pore has hand in new WHO guidelines on drinking water

By Grace Chua

THE World Health Organisation (WHO) unveiled a new set of guidelines on drinking water quality here yesterday – with Singapore playing a role in the drafting of the document.

The Republic lent its water management expertise, including desalination experience, to the drafting of the document.

It provided an expert and hosted three technical meetings to hammer out the fourth edition guidelines, which were released yesterday on the first day of Singapore International Water Week (SIWW).

Many countries, including Singapore, use the WHO document as the basis when they set their national standards and regulations on water.

The guidelines, meant for regulators and water utility companies, describe ways to keep water safe and the main risks to safe drinking water.

On desalination, they offer recommendations for treating and storing the desalinated water.

The WHO’s decision to launch the guidelines – last updated in 2004 – at the SIWW reflects the event’s growing stature.

Singapore’s involvement in the drafting of the document also reflects the recognition it has earned for its water management expertise.

Singapore’s contribution to the WHO document stems from a cooperation agreement it signed with the global public health organisation in 2007 to share its water expertise.

Professor John Fawell, an independent expert on the WHO committee that drew up the guidelines, said yesterday that Singapore’s involvement “has been very significant”.

Completion of the document would not be possible, he said, without experts like National University of Singapore toxicologist Ong Choon Nam and others from national water agency PUB.

Desalination, which supplies about 10 per cent of water here, is a key component of the Republic’s water strategy.

The first desalination plant in Tuas opened just six years ago and the ground-breaking for a bigger second plant takes place today.

More countries, such as Australia and Saudi Arabia, are also turning to desalination to meet their water needs.

The WHO guidelines launched yesterday also cover risks such as climate change and contamination by pharmaceutical drugs.

At least 884 million people around the planet do not have access to safe drinking water, and another two million die every year of water-borne diarrhoeal illnesses, said WHO coordinator Robert Bos.

The new guidelines provide the most help to these vulnerable groups, he said.