



ORSAM WATER BULLETIN

Weekly Bulletin by ORSAM Water Research Programme

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ORSAM WATER BULLETIN

16 June – 22 June 2014

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❖ Dams: Iran's weapons of marsh destruction

The Garden of Eden is dying. Reputed to be two of Eden's four rivers, the Karoun and Karkheh have been reduced to a trickle as an environmental disaster is unfolds in the Ahwaz region of Iran. One of the Middle East's last verdant areas is being turned into a wasteland as Iran pursues its drive to power up its economy by building a massive complex of dams and divert waters to central Iran.

Green and Pleasant Land

The Ahwaz region between the Zagros Mountains and the Iraqi border is a jewel in the arid Arabian Gulf region. It hosts extensive marshes and rivers that support a diverse range of fish, mammals and migratory birds, including many endangered species.

Wetland ecosystems are critical to humans. They provide food, fresh water, medicinal extracts and genetic materials. Indigenous Ahwazi Arab and Bakhtiari farmers, fishermen and traditionally nomadic peoples also depend on the waters and fertile plains they feed for their livelihoods.

Wetlands like this regulate climate. They re-charge the water supply. They help purify water. They help the soil to resist erosion. The great [Karoun, Karkheh, Dez and Jarrahi rivers](#), which flow through the Ahwaz region, play a crucial role in preventing the salt water of the Arabian Gulf flowing up the Shatt al-Arab waterway. They also bring moisture and rainfall to parched lands to the east.

UNEP: An Amazon-scale catastrophe

The Iranian regime has been [actively engaged in dam construction plans](#) with the most destructive impacts on the ecological balance of the region and desertification of the once green fields of the Ahwaz region. In the Karoun and Karkheh watersheds, a total of nine dams [have been built or are under construction](#) with a further 12 under study.

One of these plans is the [controversial transfer of water](#) from the region's rivers to the parched central provinces of Iran, including diversion tunnels to feed water from Karoun's tributaries to the Zayanderood river of Isfahan, [which is facing its own water scarcity problems](#).

The downstream effects have been devastating. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has warned that the marshlands of southwest of Iran are facing a situation similar to the

environmental catastrophes that have affected the Aral Sea and the Amazon. In a [major study on the marshes of Iraq and Iran](#), the UNEP concluded: "The cumulative impacts of dam construction upstream and intensive drainage schemes in and around the marshlands have been devastating. In less than a decade, one of the world's largest and most significant wetland ecosystems has completely collapsed."

Evaporation of the Hawr Al-Azim marsh, which borders Iraq, is being carried out on a par with Saddam's destruction of the Iraqi marshes. The marsh has a vital in maintaining the ecological balance in the Middle East, but has been almost completely desiccated.

Food security under threat

In recent years dam construction and river diversion has exacerbated the effects of drought on agriculture. Food crop output in this bread basket of Iran, which produces many of the country's staple foods, is diminishing in favour of cash crops and cheap power generation for government industries.

The dam and water diversion projects may have had a role in the massive decline in the production of wheat, a source of food for humans and livestock. The Ahwaz region is Iran's [second largest wheat-producing province](#). Around 62% of the province's wheat production is reliant on irrigation, utilising water from its rivers. [According to reports](#), in 2012 wheat output halved due to water shortages, leading to spiralling prices of meat and bread throughout Iran.

At the same time, the Iranian regime has been investing on the development of the environmentally destructive and intensively farmed cash crop sugarcane plantations which have displaced 200,000 - 250,000 Arab people, [according to one UN Special Rapporteur following a visit to the area](#).

Sand storms

Sand storms that now routinely plague the region are the result of a decline in humidity throughout the whole region as wetlands vanish. Ali Mohammad Shaeri, the vice president of the Iranian environment organization, claims that "500,000 hectares of marshlands of Ahwaz have dried out and this is the main cause of sand storms in the region."

As a result, Ahwaz has the world's worst air pollution. The Pollutant Standards Index of the air quality in Ahwaz region has passed 600 units. This is while according to the international standards a PSI over 300 units is critically hazardous.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), Ahwaz City's measure of air-born particulate matter (PM10) is 372 micrograms per cubic metre, which is a third more than the world's second-most polluted city, Mongolia's capital Ulaanbaatar and the only city in the world where average PM10 levels rise above 300 ug/m3.

The astonishing level of air pollution has taken its toll on the local population. Life expectancy is the lowest in Iran and residents suffer high levels of respiratory problems and cancer.

Dirty Water

Around half the Karoun's water flow is now waste water as upstream fresh water has been funnelled to neighbouring states. This will reach 90 per cent when Iran's dam building project is completed, according to Iranian scientists.

Due to the excessive pollution of the rivers the amount of total dissolved solids in the water has greatly increased. In the border cities of Abadan and Muhammerah, it has reached four times the maximum level for potable water.

Tap water is undrinkable and not even suitable for washing clothes. In a visit to the region, the Minister of Health refused to drink local tap water and admitted "We accept that the water in Khuzestan is very dirty and impure and we have reported the issue to the Ministry of Energy."

Iranian government scientist Dr Bakhtiari Nia remarked that water- and food-born diseases are getting worse as a result of poor water quality and a lack of access to clean water and a healthy diet. Consumption of fish living in the heavily polluted rivers of Al-Ahwaz is affecting embryo growth, while contaminated drinking water is causing disorders of the central nervous system. Residents suffer high levels of blood disorders and diseases affecting the lungs, kidneys, liver and other vital organs as well as miscarriages, cancers, osteoporosis, endocrine disorders, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's Disease and learning difficulties due to the ingestion of toxic metals.

Revolution is the Solution

The UNEP notes that "unless urgent remedial action is taken, desiccation of the last remaining vestige of the Mesopotamian marshlands is likely to continue unabated. Indeed, it is likely to accelerate as a result of substantial water retention by the Karkheh Dam and plans to transfer water from its reservoir."

Ahwaz member of parliament Sayyed Sharif Hosseini warned that the environmental problems affecting the Karoun had to be dealt with through legal means or some may resort to illegal means to pursue the issue. Speaking in parliament recently, Hosseini assured the people of Ahwaz that so long as the MPs were their representatives they would not allow Karoun's water to stop. He added that the fight for the Karoun must be pursued through cultural means and through proper channels and not allow it to become a political issue.

Hosseini is finding it difficult to put a lid on frequent political protests in Ahwaz. The official government propaganda media has reacted to the crisis by [accusing environmentalist critics of being US-sponsored separatists](#) and denying the environmental problems facing Ahwaz.

Discriminatory practices mean that indigenous Arab people of Ahwaz as well as the Bakhtiari population further north towards the Zagros mountain range are deprived of the right to manage their own affairs. The crucial managing positions are assigned to non-native people coming from other provinces. These assigned officials do not consider the right of the native people of Ahwaz over the water resources of the region.

Like all problems in Iran, the solution is political. Without regime change that empowers the local indigenous Ahwazi Arab population in how economic development progresses, the government will continue to plunder and rape Al-Ahwaz while the indigenous inhabitants, wildlife and natural beauty will pay the ultimate price.

For the Ahwazi Arabs, environmentalism and self-determination go hand in hand. The future of Eden depends on it.

“Dams: Iran's weapons of marsh destruction”, 17/06/2014, online at:

<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL1406/S00138/dams-irans-weapons-of-marsh-destruction.htm>

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❖ Drying Iranian lake gets some water but funds are short

Lake Urmia (Orumieh) is a salt lake in northwestern Iran near Turkey. The lake is between the provinces of East Azarbaijan and West Azarbaijan, west of the southern portion of the similarly shaped Caspian Sea. It is the largest lake inside Iran, and the third salt water lake on earth, with a surface area of approximately 5,200 km square (2,000 mile square).

The Fars News Agency reports that Hamid Chitchian said on Sunday June 15 that the process of replenishing the lake will take time and effort.

He stressed that the process of saving the lake will require assistance from the people of the region, adding: "Currently, the transfer of water to the southern parts of the lake has begun and is being seriously implemented."

He added that the government is facing a "shortfall in its funding resources" but it is still expecting "significant progress" in the coming days.

He added the the ministry needs farmers to do their part by adopting proposed new farming and irrigation methods, which will save water for the lake.

The lake is drying out at a rapid rate with 93 percent of it already gone. The disappearance of the lake would directly affect at least five million people in the region.

Last Tuesday, a group of activists engaged in demonstrations in Tabriz to protest the government's negligence of the lake. Five of the detainees still remain in custody.

Iran's Lake Oroumeih (also spelled Urmia) is the largest lake in the Middle East and the third largest saltwater lake on Earth. But dams on feeder streams, expanded use of ground water, and a decades-long drought have reduced it to 60 percent of the size it was in the 1980s. Light blue tones in the 2010 image represent shallow water and salt deposits. Increased salinity has led to an absence of fish and habitat for migratory waterfowl.

"Drying Iranian lake gets some water but funds are short", 16/04/2014, online at:
<http://www.payvand.com/news/14/jun/1104.html>

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❖ Water problems loom for Tehran province

Water volume in the dams in Tehran Province has declined by 24 percent compared to the same time last year. The Ministry of Power announced that the water reserves in Tehran dams have fallen to 601 million cubic metres, which indicates a decline of 188 million cubic metres from last year.

Water entering the dams has also fallen by 19 percent, the report adds.

A rise in water consumption and a decline in precipitation has reduced water reserves in the Iranian capital to their lowest levels in the past four decades.

The head of the Tehran Province water and sewage company reports a 2.4-percent increase in water consumption in the past two months, adding that the company is looking at acquiring licences to shut down water to heavy consumers.

Many environmental activists have warned that drinking water in the capital will soon reach the same critical situation as air pollution, spiraling out of control.

“Water problems loom for Tehran province”, 17/06/2014, online at: http://theiranproject.com/blog/2014/06/17/water-problems-loom-for-tehran-province/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=water-problems-loom-for-tehran-province

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❖ **Wiser use of water is the need of the hour**

Climate change has and continues to bring a plethora of changes to the environment we used to know. Among the changes include the dwindling of water resources, progressive desertification, unpredictable rainfall patterns, and its poor management practices.

The Middle East is facing critical water shortages. It has turned out to be an impediment to development, a harbinger of social crisis and ultimately a national security issue.

The scarcity of water in Yemen and the rising costs of a gallon of water in Jordan are worrying trends, which if not properly managed, can translate into social unrest, say pundits.

The paucity of water in the Middle East seems to follow two patterns.

The first group comprises countries with limited water resources and allegedly poor management practices. Unfortunately, these countries were found to be high consumers of water. The GCC countries belong to this group.

A report from the Emirates Industrial Bank in 2005 said that the UAE had the highest per capita consumption of water in the world. At the same time; its water table has dropped significantly.

Nine years on, the situation is likely to be worse, given the little attention paid to water conservation practices.

The solution to water shortage in these countries lies in sustainable and wise use of water management practices. What it takes is, to strike a balance between consumption and resources available and adjustment to water habits through awareness campaigns among the public.

In an attempt to shore up future water shortages, Kuwait has planned to import water from as far countries as in Africa! Middle East Monitor in its April 29, 2014, issue indicated that "Kuwait to buy Nile water from Ethiopia, at the rate of 66 million gallons of water per day"

It means Kuwait will import water from a country 2,450 km away, a three-hours and 45-minutes flight (one way)!

How long will the proposal sustain even if it materialises?

Proper conservation practices can offset the huge economic loss.

The second group includes those countries located around river basins. They compete for shares of the river they border. Here, water becomes a geopolitical asset. The river Jordan borders five countries - Israel, Palestine (West Bank), Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

It is believed that the competition for the water share was one of the reasons that triggered the Arab-Israeli conflict. The solution to this conflict depends on promoting mutual responsibility and understanding among the countries concerned.

The recent 'hotspot' in water conflicts is the Nile basin which borders 11 countries including Egypt and Ethiopia. The construction of a huge dam believed to generate millions of electricity by the latter and the saber-rattling rhetoric between them continues to be a grave concern for the stability of the Middle East.

Summer is around the corner, when consumption of water and electricity will go high. Care must be taken particularly when it comes to the use of water.

Water is a non-renewable resource. It is the responsibility of everybody to use it wisely.

It is said that Bahrain's ground water is declining. That is an alarm bell which everyone needs to hear and act on. Abu MohammedEx-MP 'pilfered public money' in Iraq deal

“Wiser use of water is the need of the hour”, 19/06/2014, online at: <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=379437>

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❖ UNESCO backs Palestinians over threatened West Bank landscape

The Palestinians scored a cultural victory against Israel on Friday as UNESCO granted endangered World Heritage Site status to ancient West Bank terraces under threat from the Israeli separation barrier.

After an emergency nomination by Palestinian officials, the UN cultural agency's World Heritage Committee gathering in Doha voted to grant the protected status to the agricultural community of Battir, which straddles the Green Line just south of Jerusalem and where Israel plans to erect part of the barrier.

The granting of the status is likely to boost the efforts of local residents locked in a high-profile court battle in Israel to change the route of the barrier.

"The site is inscribed, congratulations to Palestine," committee chairwoman Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani said after the resolution was narrowly approved, against the recommendations of UNESCO experts.

The Palestinian delegation rejoiced at the vote, hugging and cheering.

The Palestinian ambassador to UNESCO, Elias Sanbar, said the decision would be "etched in the memory of my people".

"Today you have taken... a courageous decision against confinement, exclusion and domination," he said.

But Shuli Davidovich, the head of the Israeli delegation, denounced the vote as "a dark day in the heritage of UNESCO".

"We regret that the committee failed to fight the politicisation" of the debate, she said.

- Roman-era irrigation -

Battir is famous for its ancient terraces and Roman-era irrigation system which is still used by villagers for their crops.

But the area has come under threat from Israeli plans to erect part of the West Bank separation barrier there, which experts say will irretrievably damage the water system.

The Palestinians won membership in UNESCO in October 2011 and quickly moved to submit a number of sites for recognition, including an emergency application for Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity which was approved in June the following year, despite Israeli objections.

In their submission for the Battir listing, the Palestinians said the landscape was under threat from "geo-political transformations that may bring irreversible damage to its authenticity and integrity".

"The main potential threat to the property is a plan by Israeli authorities to construct a physical barrier. This would prohibit access by Battir farmers to their lands," it said.

About seven kilometres (4.5 miles) south of Jerusalem, the landscape encompasses a series of agricultural valleys with stone terraces irrigated for the production of vegetables, vines and olive trees. It is dotted with ancient villages, fortifications and graves.

The Palestinian submission described the area as a "visually spectacular landscape" that give "clear testimonies of the continuous history of human settlement in the region over the past 4,000 years."

The area forms "a cultural landscape of considerable scientific interest and beauty," it said.

Israel began building its barrier in 2002 at the height of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising. It argued that its construction was crucial for security, but the Palestinians see it as a land grab aimed at stealing part of their future state.

UN figures show that Israel has already built around two-thirds of the barrier -- a network of towering concrete walls, barbed-wire fences, trenches, and closed military roads that will extend 712 kilometres (442 miles) when completed.

The Paris-based United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation oversees the system of granting coveted World Heritage Site status to important cultural and natural wonders.

Obtaining the status for sites is a point of pride for many nations and can boost tourism, but it comes with strict conservation rules.

UNESCO delegates are meeting for 10 days in Doha to consider the inscription of 40 sites on the World Heritage List and issue warnings over already-listed locations that may be in danger.

“UNESCO backs Palestinians over threatened West Bank landscape”, 20/06/2014, online at:
<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/140620/unesco-backs-palestinians-over-threatened-west-bank-landscape>

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❖ Just water supply is key issue in West Bank, Gaza says ecumenical group

Water not oil is the resource for which many people in the Middle East have a thirst, especially in the Holy Land.

"The Palestinian people thirst for water justice," said a recently issued statement by a group that recently visited Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza to better understand the critical issues of water and sanitation in Palestine.

"The Palestinian people are denied their internationally recognized human right to sufficient safe, accessible, and affordable water and adequate appropriate sanitation," the [statement by the Ecumenical Water Network](#) on Wednesday says.

The fact-finding group had 10 members of the international reference group of the Ecumenical Water Network (EWN), supported by churches and Christian organizations promoting people's access to water around the world, said the statement released by the World Council of Churches.

The group spent nearly 10 days in the area, interacting with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, non-governmental organizations, and church leaders."

The water network is a global initiative of the Geneva-based WCC.

The EWN programme executive, Dinesh Suna said, "The trip was an eye-opener for me. Never had I seen this glaring a level of disparity over water."

"The problem is not scarcity as such," he said. "Though an arid area, Israel and Palestine both receive enough precipitation.

"Ramallah gets more rain per year than London. But an average Palestinian there gets only 70 litres water per day, while the average Londoner gets around 150 litres per day, and the average Israeli over 300 litres per day."

The statement refers to the lack of clean water and adequate sanitation in the West Bank and Gaza.

It notes the steep challenges facing Palestinian residents and farmers.

Among other factors, it cites Israeli control over access to water in the West Bank, acquisition of precious aquifers by Israeli settlers.

This takes place in a complex and discouraging legal framework. It includes prohibitions against Palestinian use of well water to raise crops and animals, and prohibitions against West Bank residents building essential new water supply and wastewater treatment plants.

"In Gaza," the statement says, "the situation is even direr," with microbial contamination of 80 percent of drinking water, 95 percent of groundwater rendered unusable by the intrusion of sea water, contaminated aquifers, and inadequate desalinization facilities.

"Just water supply is key issue in West Bank, Gaza says ecumenical group", 18/06/2014, online at:
<http://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/just-water-supply-is-key-issue-in-west-bank-gaza-says-ecumenical-group-25194>

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❖ **Hamdallah Calls on UN to Implement Desalination and Water Treatment Projects**

RAMALLAH, June 12, 2014 (WAFA) – Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah received, in his office on Thursday, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Monique Barbut, where he urged to increase the UN support to the Palestinian people, especially in water desalination and wastewater reclamation projects aimed at developing the field of irrigation

The Prime Minister reasserted the Palestinians’ rights to establish an independent Palestinian state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, and the natural right to utilize and benefit from all natural resources in the Palestinian land.

Hamdallah briefed the UNCCD Executive Secretary on the Israeli violations and attacks which include uprooting trees, land and agriculture corps confiscation, colonial settlement’s expansion, in addition to the contamination of water sources due to the remnants of the colonial settlements and affiliated factories, and the Israeli ongoing obstruction which deprives the Palestinian population from their natural right to use the natural resources in the ‘C’ areas, which constitute 62% of the West Bank.

Adala Al-Atireh, the President of the Palestinian Environmental Quality Authority, also attended the meeting.

“Hamdallah Calls on UN to Implement Desalination and Water Treatment Projects” , WAFA, 17/06/2014, online at: <http://mideastenvironment.apps01.yorku.ca/2014/06/hamdallah-calls-on-un-to-implement-desalination-and-water-treatment-projects-wafa/>

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❖ Responsibility for unstable water supply in east Jerusalem still unclear

Authorities have yet to clarify who will be responsible for restoring resource in the neighborhoods of Ras Hamis, Ras Shahada, Dahyat a-Salam and the Shuafat refugee camp.

Despite months of unstable water supplies in several east Jerusalem neighborhoods beyond the security barrier, authorities have yet to clarify who will be responsible for restoring the resource to these communities.

Due to the fact that many homes in the neighborhoods of Ras Hamis, Ras Shahada, Dahyat a-Salam and the Shuafat refugee camp had either no water or very low water pressure since February, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel and area residents filed a petition on the matter to the High Court of Justice on March 25.

A week after receiving the petition, the High Court granted the respondents – the Water Authority, the National Infrastructures, Energy and Water Ministry, the Jerusalem municipality and Hagihon– Jerusalem water and Sewage Industries – 60 days to file progress reports on the situation.

While Hagihon largely slammed the Water Authority, the Energy ministry and other national bodies for the lack of improvements, these authorities requested an additional 90 days to further assess the situation.

The Jerusalem municipality issued a statement claiming that it is not responsible for delivering water to city residents, and has no authority in the matter because under existing laws it has “no practical ability to control the water within its boundaries.”

“Life has become unbearable over the past few months. The water crisis limits our ability to shower, clean and launder clothes – basic things,” Jamil Sanduka, chairman of the Ras Hamis Neighborhood Committee and one of the petitioners said. “If this happened in the west of the city a committee of inquiry would have been established. We can’t stand it any longer.”

In Hagihon’s response, the water corporation criticized the Water Authority, the Energy ministry and the Treasury for failing to deliver solutions to the problem, such as how to properly finance the infrastructure required to bring proper water flow to the communities. The company estimated that all in all, the work would require about NIS 189.5 million.

“Hagihon and the residents of the neighborhoods beyond the separation fence are ‘falling between the cracks’ of the Water Authority, the Finance ministry and the Justice ministry,” a statement from Hagihon said. “These neighborhoods are characterized by illegal construction at an unprecedented scale, which creates a compound of legal, planning, budgetary, security and above all humanitarian issues.”

The company said that far before the petition was filed it began demanding that the relevant government authorities address all of these security, legal and budgetary aspects, as Hagihon is unable to bear the legal and economic demands of the situation.

In addition, Hagihon requested that the High Court order the Water Authority and the other government bodies to act to regulate the circumstances without further delay, particularly because “hot summer days are ahead of us and are expected to exacerbate the problem.”

“Hagihon provides thus far water on a humanitarian basis at a cost of NIS 10m. per year, and will not be able to continue to do so in the long term,” a statement from the company said.

Tens of thousands of people live in these neighborhoods, many in illegal housing, to which a 1965 planning and building law forbids the provision of water, the Water Authority and Energy Ministry wrote in their response.

Many residents are connected to the water network illegally, through pirate systems, and the network experiences great congestion, the response added.

According to reports received by the Water Authority and the Energy ministry, improvements in supply occurred in April.

Nonetheless, the authorities said, finding solutions for the previous cessations has been difficult due to problems identifying the root of the issue.

With the goal of pinpointing solutions from planning, engineering, legal, financial and security perspectives, the Water Authority and Energy ministry wrote that they have held several high-level meetings with relevant parties.

The municipality said that its ability to provide ongoing services to neighborhoods in east Jerusalem is limited.

Association for Civil Rights in Israel attorney Keren Tzafrir, who was responsible for filing the petition, said: “Sadly, just weeks after the celebrations marking the ‘unification’ of the city, the municipality doesn’t even hide its sweeping repudiation of Jerusalem residents living on the other side of the separation barrier.”

“Just a month ago, we saw the mayor rush to the Hagihon control room following a water supply problem in west Jerusalem,” Tzafrir said, referring to an April 30 water contamination incident.

“In the eastern neighborhoods, beyond the barrier, this problem has persisted for four months and it seems no government body deems it urgent enough to solve.”

“Responsibility for unstable water supply in east Jerusalem still unclear” ,Jerusalem Post, 17/06/2014, online at:
<http://mideastenvironment.apps01.yorku.ca/2014/06/responsibility-for-unstable-water-supply-in-east-jerusalem-still-unclear-jerusalem-post/>

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❖ **Health Ministry opposes gray water plan for households**

Ministry says no despite approval of committee to extend use of gray water for gardening, toilets, other uses.

By Zafrir Rinat | Jun. 10, 2014

The Health Ministry has demanded that the Standards Institute of Israel not approve a new standard that would broaden the use of gray water.

Although the standard was already approved by a committee of experts at the Standards Institute, Health Ministry officials asked the institute's director to delay final approval for now.

The experts, for their part, are demanding that the management approve the new standard for gray water as soon as possible.

The purpose of using gray water is to reuse water in many places where water is necessary, such as gardening and flushing toilets (the gray water is piped to the toilet tank), resulting in lower water bills for many households.

Two months ago, a committee of experts at the Standards Institute of Israel approved Standard 6147 for gray-water systems installed in new or existing buildings. The standard is for water collected from bathroom sinks, showers, bathtubs and washing machines. It does not include water from toilets, kitchen sinks or dishwashers. The standard defines the water quality that must be maintained, the permitted uses of gray water and the means of transporting, treating and inspecting it.

So far, the Health Ministry permitted the use of gray water in several public buildings while setting safety and quality standards intended to keep the public from using polluted water. However, gray-water systems with no set standard have been installed in thousands of homes, contrary to the position of the Health Ministry, which is not convinced that they are safe enough.

The standard set by the experts' committee was supposed to receive final approval in the form of the signature of Daniel Goldstein, the Standards Institute's director. But Dr. Ronni Gamzu, director-general of the Health Ministry, contacted Goldstein six weeks ago and asked him not to approve the standard.

In his letter, Gamzu said the Health Ministry opposed the standard since the quality and control of the water did not meet his requirements, and this could endanger public health. He wrote that the

ministry had completed a series of hearings of a committee that had been established to examine the subject of using gray water.

The committee submitted its recommendations to Health Minister Yael German, and soon the ministry will be examining legislation about sweeping regulation of gray-water use.

“There is no place for setting a standard that opposes the Health Ministry’s position on the matter and that opposes the position presented by the professional committee that the Health Minister appointed to examine the issue,” Gamzu wrote in his letter.

Last month, the committee of experts contacted Goldstein and asked him to sign the standard. They claimed that Gamzu’s letter was a blatant attempt to interfere in the discussions and decisions of independent committees. “After almost four years of work and after all the conditions for preparing the standard had been fulfilled, it does not seem reasonable to us that political elements should interfere in the procedure of establishing standards,” the committee members wrote.

A Standards Institute spokesman said, “The director-general of the Health Ministry has asked for a meeting with the director of the Standards Institute before the standard was approved. We believe that following the meeting, which will take place soon, it will be possible to reach agreements and approve the standard.”

A Health Ministry spokesman commented, “The ministry is not opposed to using gray water. The committee established by the health minister recommended that the matter be promoted, as part of which the use of gray water would be permitted in private homes in addition to public buildings, as has been done until now. The ministry opposes the standard in its current form because it determines the required water-quality data. The subject is under the exclusive authority of the Health Ministry, in accordance with legislation dealing with the consolidation of treated wastewater.”

“Health Ministry opposes gray water plan for households”, Haaretz, 17/06/2014, online at:

<http://mideastenvironment.apps01.yorku.ca/2014/06/health-ministry-opposes-gray-water-plan-for-households-haaretz/>

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❖ Drought and construction reveal extent of Baalbek river pollution

BAALBEK, Lebanon: “One of Lebanon’s most significant tourist sites is now a source of repulsive odors,” Mohammad sighs. Lost in thought as he looks down at the Ras al-Ain River, which flows through downtown Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley, he forgets to take the order of a customer at the King restaurant where he works. The water has long been polluted, Mohammad says.

“Houses and restaurant owners have been dumping all their waste in the stream. ... This has been happening for years now.”

“The river became a dumpster. People are now avoiding going past the stream.”

However, the issue has recently become more controversial. Though the accumulating garbage on the riverbed was largely ignored while it was covered by water, the shortage of rainfall this winter and sporadic heat waves in the last few months have made the problem more apparent and caused other complications. Now it is not only highly polluted, but is also facing a possible extended drought.

Al-Bayada, the main spring nourishing the river, has been drying up since last September. It is not only vital for the river, but also for the historical Ras al-Ain meadow surrounding the stream. For the residents of Baalbek, the meadow, which dates back 2,500 years, is close to their hearts as both a touristic destination and a key part of the ancient city.

Built by the Romans next to what was formerly a water temple, the once-verdant field has borne witness to centuries of change. Now dying for lack of water, the increasingly poor state of the huge space of land has prompted officials and residents of the city to take action.

“The drought facing Al-Bayada Spring, Ras al-Ain River and the different surface wells foreshadows a major environmental problem in Baalbek,” says Rami Lakkis, president of the Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training, a Baalbek-based development group.

“The organization realized early on what we were up against and this is why we took a series of initiatives.”

The drought is not the only thing drying up Al-Bayada Spring.

“The rise of building and the construction of artesian wells around the spring has had a direct effect on the level of water and its pollution,” explains Hamad Hasan, the mayor of Baalbek.

Hasan believes such activities have endangered the city's green spaces and damaged tourism and economic development in the area.

"The drying-out spring revealed the need to change the sewage system," Hamad says. "This has also been contributing to the accumulation of waste."

The dire need to save both the spring and river has forced the municipality to call on citizens with knowledge of the issue to suggest their own projects.

"One idea we have is to build an underground artesian well surrounding Al-Bayada Spring," Hamad says. "But it's very expensive." The cost of building the 400-meter-deep well is estimated at around \$100,000, far beyond the municipality's budget.

Instead of a costly well, some believe there are cheaper ways to solve the problem.

The Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training has been working on the issue since 2008, organizing awareness campaigns for students and residents. So far, however, despite drawing up petitions calling for those who throw rubbish in the water to be held accountable, nothing has been done.

"The main responsibility lies with the municipality," Lakkis explains. "It needs to penalize citizens living next to the river and prevent the random settlement of Syrian refugees."

Time may be running out, however, with Baalbek facing an environmental, economic and touristic catastrophe if the necessary action is not taken to end the abuse of Ras al-Ain River and Al-Bayada Spring.

"Drought and construction reveal extent of Baalbek river pollution", Daily Star, 17/06/2014, online at:

<http://mideastenvironment.apps01.yorku.ca/2014/06/drought-and-construction-reveal-extent-of-baalbek-river-pollution-daily-star/>

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❖ **Ethiopia's ambassador: Sisi's visit to Ethiopia to open great cooperation prospects**

Ethiopian Ambassador to Cairo Mahmoud Dirdir said the anticipated visit of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to Ethiopia would open great prospects for cooperation between the two countries, describing the upcoming meeting as positive for Egypt and Ethiopia, the fates of which are linked by the Nile River.

Ethiopia's relations with Israel are not employed against Arab countries, Dirdir told OnTV Live Channel Saturday evening.

There have been tensions in relations between Egypt and Ethiopia recently despite the strong historical and religious ties linking the two peoples, Dirdir added.

He called on officials to work on strengthening relations between the two countries and not to limit them to the Nile water crisis.

Dirdir pointed out that Ethiopia backed Egypt's return to the African Union, adding that an Ethiopian popular diplomatic delegation will visit Egypt soon to strengthen relations between the two peoples.

The Ethiopian Foreign Minister Tedros Adhanom said, on Thursday, Sisi plans to visit Addis Ababa, within two weeks, where he will meet with Prime Minister Miriam Healy Dessalines.

“Ethiopia's ambassador: Sisi's visit to Ethiopia to open great cooperation prospects”, 22/06/2014, online at: <http://www.egyptindependent.com//news/ethiopia-s-ambassador-sisi-s-visit-ethiopia-open-great-cooperation-prospects>

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❖ Sisi will resolve Nile crisis, says Egypt's new Water Minister

Cairo, *Asharq Al-Awsat*—Egypt's new Irrigation and Water Resources Minister Hossam Maghazi has said he expects a breakthrough in the crisis between Cairo and Addis Ababa over Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam once newly-elected President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi becomes personally involved in the talks.

Sisi is expected to hold a meeting with Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn on the sidelines of the forthcoming African Union summit in Equatorial Guinea later this month. Sisi's participation comes a few days after Egypt's membership to the African Union was restored.

In comments to *Asharq Al-Awsat*, Maghazi said: "The Nile water crisis is currently being handled at the highest levels of government, with President Sisi personally managing this file."

"A number of proposals for the fair usage of Nile water have been put forward, but a resolution requires the political will of Addis Ababa," he added.

Ethiopia is in the process of constructing the Grand Renaissance Dam, which will be the largest dam on the Nile River and is expected to be finished in 2017. Cairo says the dam project threatens its share of Nile water and will reduce the amount of electricity produced by the Aswan High Dam. Talks between Cairo and Addis Ababa stalled earlier this year with former Egyptian Water Minister Mohamed Abdul Muttalib saying: "Egypt has exhausted all avenues of negotiation about the dam." Sisi made the resolution of the crisis one of his election priorities.

Maghazi, who was appointed Water Minister earlier this week, said he was ready to bear the responsibility to protect Egypt's share of Nile water. He told *Asharq Al-Awsat*: "We will seek to strengthen historic relations with the countries of the Nile basin and to work with them to maximize the benefit from the Nile for all countries without negatively affecting Egypt's historic and legitimate rights."

"Egypt does not oppose the aspirations of the Ethiopian people and is willing to provide technical support for the construction of the dam provided it does not harm the interests of both countries," he added.

"Sisi will resolve Nile crisis, says Egypt's new Water Minister", 20/06/2014, online at:
<http://www.aawsat.net/2014/06/article55333473>

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❖ Khartoum pushes for new Nile River accord

Sudan has announced it would support upstream Nile basin countries to review the colonial-era agreement over the sharing of its water resources which had provoked strong protests. Sudanese Minister of Irrigation and Water Resources Mutaz Musa Abdullah was quoted in the press in Khartoum on Friday as saying that his country recognizes the rights of its upstream neighbours to a reasonable and equitable utilization of the Nile River resources for the benefit of their people, stressing that cooperation among them should be the priority.

He told Thursday's one-day meeting of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) Conference in Khartoum that while some states have the opportunity to generate electricity, others have agricultural land and industrial capabilities at their disposal.

Our biggest challenge is how to build confidence among the Nile basin countries to establish a strong regional bloc to reduce poverty and offer support for people in the region Mr. Abdullah urged.

The Nile Basin Conference witnessed the participation of all members including Egypt which boycotted the preparatory meeting in Khartoum before the event.

the conference took place against the backdrop of a prolonged dispute between Addis Ababa and Cairo over the construction of a controversial dam on the Nile by Ethiopia.

The meeting witnessed the handing over of the NBI chairmanship from South Sudan to Sudan.

In February 2011, the upstream countries of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan and Burundi signed the Entebbe Agreement which plans for a revision of the agreement over sharing the waters of the Nile.

Egypt remains opposed to the idea of a revision, saying it violates its legal and historical rights to the Nile waters according to agreements signed with Britain during the colonial era.

"Khartoum pushes for new Nile River accord", 20/06/2014, online at: <http://en.starafrica.com/news/khartoum-pushes-for-new-nile-river-accord.html>

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❖ **Sudan says Egypt suspended participation in activities of Nile Basin Initiative**

June 18, 2014 (KHARTOUM) – The Nile-Technical Advisory Committee (Nile-TAC) of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) announced today that Egypt has suspended participation in NBI activities. Sudan's minister of irrigation and water resources and chairperson of the NBI, Saif al-Din Hamad, said at a press conference on Wednesday that Egypt suspended participation in the NBI and did not attend the preparatory meetings which was held recently in Khartoum.

But Sudan's official news agency (SUNA) reported that an Egyptian delegation headed by ambassador Sherif Isa arrived in Khartoum to participate in the NBI 22nd ministerial meeting that will start on Thursday.

Hamad said that Sudan recognizes the right of the upstream countries to a reasonable and equitable utilization of the Nile resources for the benefit of their people, stressing that cooperation among the Nile basin countries is inevitable.

He highlighted the integrative opportunities for promoting cooperation among the Nile basin countries, saying that while some states have the opportunity to generate electricity, others have agricultural land at their disposal and others have industrial capabilities.

The Sudanese official said that Ethiopia could produce 160, 000 Kilowatt-hours of electricity besides Eritrea's agricultural capabilities which offers an opportunity for launching joint projects between the Nile basin countries.

The Sudanese minister also spoke of water loss from the heavy rains in the equatorial Nile, saying that it has an adverse impact on growing crops which consume large amounts of water such as rice and sugar cane.

He noted that South Sudan has great potential for electric power generation and Egypt has large industrial capabilities, underscoring the need for cooperation between the two countries to take advantage of these integrative opportunities.

“Our biggest challenge is how to build confidence among the Nile basin countries to establish a strong regional bloc in order to reduce poverty and offer support for the people in the region”, he added.

The meeting of ministers in charge of water affairs in the NBI in Khartoum on Thursday will witness a change in the NBI governance in which South Sudan’s minister for Electricity, Water and Irrigation, Jemma Nunu Kumba will hand over the chairmanship of the Sudanese minister of electricity, Mutaz Musa Abdalla Salim.

The changes in the NBI leadership and top management are in line with the NBI tradition of rotating the two positions among its member states in alphabetical order.

However, whereas the position of Nile-COM chair rotates each year, that of its executive director alternates every two years.

During the one-day meeting, ministers from the NBI countries are also expected to extensively deliberate on the status of the Nile cooperation and how to move it forward.

“They will also take time to review progress made by the NBI in the previous fiscal year, consider the plans and budgets for the coming year and provide strategic guidance,” party reads the statement.

Meanwhile, the Nile-TAC, NBI management, representatives of development partners and the civil society will participate in meeting as observers.

An NBI information network official for his part pointed to the need for building a database for the NBI, saying cooperation among the member countries is inevitable for the management of crucial water resources.

The NBI is a partnership among the Nile riparian states that “seeks to develop the river in a cooperative manner, share substantial socioeconomic benefits, and promote regional peace and security”.

It began with a dialogue among the riparian states that resulted in a shared vision to “achieve sustainable socioeconomic development through the equitable utilization of, and benefit from, the common Nile Basin water resources.”

The NBI was formally launched in February 1999 by the water ministers of nine countries that share the river : Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as well as Eritrea as an observer.

The Entebbe Agreement, designed to reallocate Nile water shares, was signed in February 2011 by Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Sudan and Burundi.

But Egypt rejected the accord saying it violates its legal rights in the Nile water per agreements signed during the colonial era.

Cairo is also in a lingering dispute with Addis Ababa over the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam as it fears the dam will diminish its water share and will eventually affect the country’s people, most of whom heavily rely upon the Nile’s water.

“ Sudan says Egypt suspended participation in activities of Nile Basin Initiative”, 18/06/2014, online at: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article51385>

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❖ Egypt's breadbasket Nile Delta under threat from illegal building

Farmers say would rather build or sell than farm their land

* Pressure on farmland noted by Sisi during campaign

* Experts say buildings and demolitions do long-term harm to farmland

By Maggie Fick and Mahmoud Mourad

KAHA, Egypt, June 18 (Reuters) - In the Nile Delta province of Qalubiya, lifelong residents remember the days when lush farmland stretched as far as the eye could see.

Today, their view is marred by unfinished brick tenement buildings with metal rods jutting into the sky - signs of the growing problem of illegal construction in Egypt's agricultural heartland.

The unlicensed building is more than an eyesore - it threatens plans by the world's top wheat importer to cut its costly imports bill by growing more locally.

Scarce farmland has been eroded for decades by relentless population growth and urban sprawl, and the pace of unlicensed building exploded since 2011 when the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak led to a security vacuum.

The Agriculture Ministry estimates that some 30,000 feddans (acres) have been lost each year to unlicensed construction in the past three years, up from 10,000 feddans before the revolt.

Around the Qalubiya town of Kaha, about 50 km (30 miles) north of Cairo, residents are building new homes on farmland on the outskirts of town in areas where crops such as wheat and corn or fruits and vegetables used to be grown.

Farmers like Omar Mahmoud saw an opportunity in the breakdown of law and order after Mubarak was toppled to build an enclosed pen for his livestock on his own land without interference from police or the local government.

Although he now faces a lawsuit and the threat of fines, he says he is considering building a larger structure for his family on the land.

Local farmers eke out a subsistence living on land they inherited from their fathers, but some are fed up with the ever-rising costs - and diminishing returns - of their trade.

"Farming no longer helps me get by," said Mahmoud, standing amid the rice patties he just planted after harvesting his wheat crop last month. "I'd rather build on it, or sell it off if someone offered me a good price."

INFLUX FROM TOWNS

Pressure on the land was noted by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi during his election campaign last month, when he proposed that the state build cities in the desert, relieving demand on the thin ribbon of farmland which runs alongside the River Nile and the Delta north of the capital.

The Nile Delta is the one of the most densely populated parts of the country of 86 million people, and Egypt's breadbasket. The vast majority of Egypt's wheat production comes from the Nile Delta and Valley.

Landowners in the Delta are not just building for themselves. Some families moving out of the increasingly expensive cities are buying new homes on converted farmland for less than the price of a small flat in town.

Near Mahmoud's freshly harvested wheat fields, a new neighbourhood of recently built mud brick homes is further evidence of the influx of residents from the towns.

Abdel Latif Sabr, 65, was living in a small flat with his three sons and their growing families before he moved to a four-room home in a district that was, until two years ago, a fruit farm on the edge of wheat fields.

"God blessed us and gave us this complete life," he said as proudly gestured to the bedroom where some of his 12 grandchildren sleep.

Sabr fears fines from the local government and possibility of eviction, but says there has been no word from the authorities since six months ago when he was told by the city council that it was bringing a lawsuit against him.

BUILDINGS DYNAMITED

Authorities in the Delta provinces where lush fields hug the Nile river have stepped up efforts to confront the illegal buildings, but have struggled to keep up with the pace.

New neighbourhoods spring up as others lie in ruins, evidence of a dynamiting campaign that has intensified in recent months, according to Abdul-Mohsen Al-Essily, the top local official in the town of Kaha.

"The extent of infringement (on farmland) since the (2011) revolution exceeds the total amount during the 30 years of Mubarak, given the lack of police presence," he said.

"There must be a deterrent to building on agricultural land through punishment," he said, flipping through a notebook with handwritten destruction orders.

While it is unclear if the public demolitions and the sight of whole neighbourhoods lying in ruin is deterring further construction, experts say the process could prevent efforts to reclaim farmland.

Between the clearing of land for building, the construction of brick and cement structures and their subsequent destruction, the land loses its agricultural value, says Cairo University agronomist Gamal Siam. Restoring it for agricultural use is difficult and takes years, he said.

"If the current rate of farmland loss continues, in 50 years or so, we will have lost every piece of our agricultural land."

"Egypt's breadbasket Nile Delta under threat from illegal building", 18/06/2014, online at:
<http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/06/18/egypt-farmland-wheat-idINL6N0OZ1Q520140618>

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❖ Vietnam Leading the Way for Improved Transboundary Water Governance

1997 UN Watercourse Convention to Enter into Force

Vietnam has ratified a United Nations treaty on transboundary rivers, and it is time for other Mekong countries to do the same.

On May 19, Vietnam became the 35th country to ratify the 1997 UN Convention on Non-navigational uses of International Watercourses (UNWC). This is an important global milestone because the treaty required 35 ratifications to enter into force. It will now come into effect on August 17, 2014.

Vietnam's decision also sends an important message to the Mekong region. While the Mekong River is already governed by an international treaty – the 1995 Mekong Agreement – it has been wrongfully misinterpreted at times by Laos and other governments in the region as meaningless and unbinding.

The UNWC sets out the rules for how governments are expected to share transboundary rivers in a fair way, balancing the rights of upstream and downstream governments. These rules come from decades of international practice across the world. Using various mechanisms such as prior consultations, these rules provide a way to resolve the tensions that can arise when an upstream governments wants to use the river in a way that potentially causes significant harm to downstream governments.

In other words, the UNWC provides a possible way around the gridlock facing the Mekong River Commission.

Indeed, the Mekong Agreement is explicitly based on the draft UNWC. When the Mekong Agreement was drafted, the governments took almost all of the language directly from the text that would later become the UNWC. Unfortunately, the Mekong River Commission has stepped away from using the UNWC as a beacon for how to interpret the Mekong Agreement. If you examine the international law underlying the words that were carefully chosen to be included in the Mekong Agreement, the treaty's requirements are clear. However if one ignores the underlying international

law, as the MRC has done at times, then the treaty appears ambiguous and open to the misinterpretations that have been offered by Laos.

What this means in practice has become alarmingly apparent through the handling of the Xayaburi Dam, the first project to be submitted by Laos to the Mekong River Commission (MRC) for Prior Consultation (PNPCA) under the Mekong Agreement. Instead of responding to the requests from neighboring countries to conduct further studies, Laos moved forward unilaterally with the Xayaburi Dam, beginning construction while Cambodia and Vietnam continued to voice strong concerns about the transboundary impacts. By November 2012, the implementation of the project had advanced so far that Cambodia and Vietnam had little remaining leverage to raise concerns. And yet there has still been no official resolution to the PNPCA process.

Xayaburi Dam has set a dangerous precedent for future cooperation in the Mekong, which urgently needs to be addressed, particularly given the rapid progress towards construction of the Don Sahong Dam. While the 1995 Agreement aims to create an even playing field for upstream and downstream countries, in practice Laos continues to misinterpret the Mekong Agreement and international law, demonstrating a lack of real commitment to shared regional interests.

Vietnam has been steadfast in raising concerns about the impacts of both the Xayaburi and Don Sahong dams. During the PNPCA process for the Xayaburi Dam, Vietnam called for a moratorium on all dam building on the Mekong River for a period of 10 years, as recommended by the MRC's Strategic Environmental Assessment. However, despite steadily voicing concern within the consultation process and now calling for the Don Sahong Dam to also undergo Prior Consultation, Vietnam has been hindered by regional politics and delicate diplomatic relationships as well as perceived ambiguities in the 1995 Mekong Agreement.

By ratifying the UNWC, Vietnam is making a public call for change, for improved governance and more equitable decision-making in the Mekong, and sending an important message that international rivers must be managed by and for all riparian nations, not just one.

At the second MRC Summit held in Ho Chi Minh City in April, the Prime Minister of Vietnam urged Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos to also sign on to the Convention. We hope that the Lower Mekong countries will follow Vietnam's example for the sake of the Mekong River, its future and the people

who depend on it. Through this action, Vietnam has offered a fair and equitable solution to the Mekong conflict. We hope that the other countries will listen.

“Vietnam Leading the Way for Improved Transboundary Water Governance”, 18/06/2014, online at:
<http://www.internationalrivers.org/blogs/259>

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❖ **Mekong River Countries Face ‘Make or Break Moment’ Over Lao Dams**

Mekong River countries face a “make or break moment” next week when they meet under a regional mechanism to discuss a defiant move by Laos to build a second dam along the major Southeast Asian artery, a global environmental group said Wednesday.

The Don Sahong hydropower dam project will be discussed at the June 26-27 ministerial-level meeting in Bangkok of the Mekong River Commission (MRC)—an inter-governmental agency made up of representatives from the four Lower Mekong nations Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The project will be the second dam on the Lower Mekong mainstream, following the controversial Xayaburi dam that Laos has begun constructing despite opposition from neighboring Cambodia and Vietnam.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) said in a report ahead of the MRC talks that the regional agency must “prevent unilateral interests from shattering regional cooperation and joint management of one of the world’s great rivers.”

It said time was running out to halt the two controversial dams that could do “irreversible damage” to food security and critically endangered river dolphins.

“The MRC joint decision-making process was effectively broken in 2012 when Laos decided unilaterally to proceed with Xayaburi dam, against the express wishes of Vietnam and Cambodia,” said Marc Goichot, WWF-Greater Mekong’s sustainable hydropower expert.

“The meeting in Bangkok is the make or break moment for the Mekong River. It’s not too late to suspend Xayaburi dam construction before irreversible harm occurs early next year.”

Laos announced its decision in September last year to proceed with the Don Sahong dam, bypassing the MRC’s consultation process.

“Mekong countries must urgently get the MRC back on track and resolve ambiguities over the consultation process,” Goichot said.

‘Perilous state of cooperation’

The MRC’s Joint Committee failed in January to reach agreement on whether or not the Don Sahong dam is required to undergo regional decision-making, and elevated the decision to the ministerial meeting.

“The impasse over Don Sahong dam shows the perilous state of cooperation in the Lower Mekong,” Goichot said.

“The Mekong is a shared river and the four countries are bound by the MRC agreement to reach decisions jointly on dams that impact their neighbors.”

Without effective regional cooperation, WWF said, food security for more than 60 million people would be “in jeopardy.”

The Don Sahong dam will be built at the downstream end of the Hou Sahong channel, which runs about five kilometers (about three miles) between the major islands of Don Sahong and Don Sadam.

The dam threatens the Mekong’s critically endangered Irrawaddy dolphins and will block the only channel available for dry-season fish migration, putting the world’s largest inland fishery at risk, WWF said.

To date, close to 150,000 people have signed WWF’s petition calling on the Malaysian dam builder, Mega First, to pull out of the project.

Infrastructure work in full swing

Construction of the Don Sahong dam is scheduled to begin later this year, but infrastructure work has

been going on for some time.

A site visit early this month by another global green group, International Rivers, confirmed that workers have begun construction of a bridge connecting the mainland to Don Sadam Island, the group said in a report Wednesday.

The bridge will create an access route for construction on the Hou Sahong Channel, it said.

Villagers around Don Sahong were informed in November 2013 that they would be resettled to make way for the dam, but do not yet know when they will be moved, creating a feeling of uncertainty regarding the future, International Rivers said.

While fishing has been banned on the Hou Xang Pheuak channel flanking the Hou Sahong channel to allow for Mega First to work on creating a fish passage, no compensation or livelihood restoration has been provided for families who can no longer depend on the significant source of income derived from the river, according to International Rivers.

"Continued construction towards the Don Sahong Dam is an unwelcome déjà vu for Mekong communities and governments as Laos continues to move forward unilaterally with decisions which threaten the entire region," said Pianporn Deetes, Thailand Campaign Coordinator for International Rivers.

"The risks go well-beyond the borders of Laos—the Don Sahong Dam will irreversibly impact livelihoods and food security throughout the Mekong.

"There are at least 65 million people in the four countries using the Mekong River," Deetes told RFA's Lao Service. "Now we are trying to let people and society widely know that the Mekong is at risk and we want them to understand and express their voices to decision makers to understand that this is a huge issue in the region."

The WWF urged Mekong ministers to defer a decision on Lower Mekong main stem dams for 10

years to ensure critical data can be gathered and a decision can be reached using sound science and analysis.

“Mekong River Countries Face ‘Make or Break Moment’ Over Lao Dams”, 18/06/2014, online at:

<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/dam-06182014211057.html>

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❖ Lawmakers Updated on Major Dam on Mekong Tributaries

PHNOM PENH — Ruling party lawmakers at the National Assembly held a hearing Thursday for an update on a major dam on the Sesan and Srepok rivers in Stung Treng province.

The lawmakers questioned Suy Sem, the Minister of Mining and Industry, for much of a two and a half hour session, in a hearing that was aimed at oversight but that contained little criticism of the project overall.

Environmental groups say the Lower Sesan 2 Dam, costing \$816 million, will be an ecological threat to two of the Mekong River's largest tributaries and a social threat to the people who live nearby.

The dam is a joint development between EVN International, from Vietnam, and the Royal Group, of Cambodia. It is expected to produce 400 megawatts of power and be completed in 2017.

Critics of the dam say it will affect tens of thousands of people in nearly 80 villages in Stung Treng and will hurt the migrations of fish in a country that relies heavily on them for protein.

Fifty-seven lawmakers, all from the Cambodian People's Party, attended the session.

Hun Neng, a lawmaker from Kampong Cham province, asked whether the ministry or the development company had done enough to compensate people displaced by the dam. "What have you done?" he asked. "Please show evidence."

Suy Sem said that each of the nearly 800 families expected to be moved by the dam and its reservoir would be offered five hectares of farmland elsewhere as a resettlement package.

"We have spent nearly 10 years working on this project," he said. "That means we have done a lot of things to ensure that everything is OK before we start. And there is no such dam project that has zero effects on the environment. But we have to think of it as a whole and how we are going to benefit."

Lawmaker Loak Kheng asked whether money from the timber cut down for the dam has been put in the national budget—a question Suy Sem said he could not answer. But he said the dam will be a cheap source of electricity and will create jobs.

Absent from Thursday's hearing were lawmakers from the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party, who have boycotted the Assembly since the July 2013 elections.

Rescue Party spokesman Yem Bonharith said Thursday the hearing was ineffective.

“They stand up and ask pre-prepared questions,” he said. “And then they stand up to answer questions they have already prepared.”

“Lawmakers Updated on Major Dam on Mekong Tributaries”, 19/06/2014, online at:

<http://www.voacambodia.com/content/lawmakers-updated-on-major-dam-on-mekong-tributaries/1940523.html>

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❖ Cambodia's Parliament OKs Dam Compensation Plan

Cambodia's energy minister allayed concerns in parliament over inadequate compensation offered to villagers who face relocation for a proposed China-backed dam on a Mekong River tributary, saying the government has allocated to villagers more than four times the area taken over for the project.

Minister of Mines and Energy Suy Sem was summoned to the National Assembly to answer questions on government policy related to the 400 megawatt Lower Sesan 2 hydropower dam, which would be constructed along the Sesan River in northeast Cambodia's Stung Treng province.

Villagers campaigning against the dam have expressed concern about compensation for being displaced by the project, which they say would also destroy protected forest areas, kill rare fish, and negatively impact local ethnic minority culture.

National Assembly spokesperson Chheang Von said that lawmakers on the whole accepted Suy Sem's two-and-a-half hour explanation of plans to compensate villagers, the dam's construction process and its impact on the environment.

But he cautioned that the dam's developers should stick to their proposed plans.

"We can accept this explanation, as long as he promises that he will work with the companies to implement the plan correctly," Chheang Von told RFA's Khmer Service, adding that lawmakers would also "monitor" the government project.

"The villagers who agreed to be relocated have made a big sacrifice and we must repay them," he said.

Studies have suggested the Lower Sesan 2 project in Stung Treng could displace 5,000 people and adversely affect 100,000 more through a more than 9 percent drop in fish stocks in the Mekong Basin.

Suy Sem's explanation to parliament marked the first time the National Assembly, which opposition lawmakers have boycotted since disputed elections in July last year, has summoned a government minister to answer questions on national policy.

During the session, Suy Sem acknowledged that the dam would impact the environment, but assured lawmakers that studies would be done ahead of its construction.

The minister pledged to provide relocated villagers with 1,000 square meters (10,760 square feet) of land to build new homes and 5 hectares (12 acres) of land for each family to grow crops.

He declined to comment on potential deforestation that could arise from the project, saying the issue was not within his ministry's purview.

Speaking to reporters after the Assembly session, Suy Sem said that the expected benefits of the dam outweigh the likely impact of its construction.

He added that around 910 hectares (2,250 acres) of villagers' land will be affected by the project, but the government has reserved about 4,060 hectares (10,030 acres) as compensation.

Continued protests

But despite Suy Sem's reassurances that the compensation needs of relocated villagers would be met, many of those who will be displaced by the dam's constructions have continued to hold out and refuse government offers.

Some of them wanted to remain on their traditional land while others felt that the offered land was less valuable.

Last month, villagers walked out of negotiations with the government's compensation committee, saying their demands had been ignored.

A villager representative named Ly Bek told RFA that the construction would directly affect indigenous lands that have long been used for farming and traditional burial grounds, and that residents would refuse to leave.

"They can't leave their ancestors land, so there is no solution," he said.

A village official named Sek Mekong said that residents had refused government offers since December because terms were "vague" and compensation "fell short of market price."

He said that if the government continues to push the same policy, he would refuse to participate in relocation talks.

Call for halt

In December, villagers living along Mekong River tributaries in northeastern Cambodia protested in front of the Chinese Embassy in the capital Phnom Penh calling on the authorities to scrap three proposed China-backed dam projects, including the Lower Sesan 2, citing environmental and other concerns.

Residents of riparian communities along the Sesan, Sekong and Srepok rivers presented a petition to the embassy detailing the plight of the 75,000 people they say could be directly affected by the proposed dams.

The petition called on Chinese Ambassador Bu Jianguo to stop Chinese companies Hydrolancang International Energy and Hounan Group from building the Lower Sesan 2, which is to be constructed in conjunction with Cambodian conglomerate Royal Group.

The petition called on the Chinese authorities to also scrap two proposed, 300 megawatt dams in Ratanakiri—the Lower Sesan 3 dam to be developed by China’s Sinohydro Resources and the Srepok 3 dam undertaken by Huadian Hong Kong Co. Ltd.

Land-clearing preparations for the Lower Sesan 2, which were started in March last year, were suspended by the government in October, but Suy Sem’s visit to parliament suggests the project may go forward.

“Cambodia’s Parliament OKs Dam Compensation Plan”, 19/06/2014, online at:
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/dam-06192014195419.html>

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❖ Too much, too little: Water crises abound

After creeping slowly northward for weeks, the rainy season finally hit Tokyo earlier this month. And rain it has.

For days on end the rain can fall, heavy and steady, saturating Tokyo. There's not much we can do except wait out the downpours, but the rains offer a bit of calm and the trees take on a deep, rich green that is almost surreal.

In terrifying contrast, news from the Middle East has focused on Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Sunni insurgents now sweeping across Syria and Iraq. Heavily armed and loaded in pickup trucks, the militants are shown in images barreling across arid, windswept landscapes, no greenery in sight, with clouds of dust and sand billowing out from behind their vehicles.

The Sunni-Shiite ISIS conflict is not a fight over water, not yet anyway, but one wonders how different the region might be if water were plentiful and the land verdant.

And what of the tens of thousands of refugees now streaming across Syria and Iraq, looking for safety? As they flee to a third country in need of shelter, food and water, might not Japan be drawn into a military conflict, or a humanitarian-aid quagmire?

Do a Google search for “water conflict” and you'll get nearly 10 million hits. Africa, the Middle East, India and China are the places that pop up most often.

The World Economic Forum has ranked water crises “the third-biggest risk to stability in the decade ahead,” with fiscal crises and unemployment in first and second place, respectively, according to Beth Gardiner in a recent New York Times article (June 2).

On The Guardian website (Feb. 9), Suzanne Goldenberg pointed out how divergent water crises can be. This past winter while Britain was “drowning in misery” from Atlantic storms flooding its southwestern region, 1 billion people on the planet did not have access to safe drinking water, she noted.

James Famiglietti, a hydrologist at the University of California, Irvine, confirmed that divergence is becoming the norm. The wet areas of the Earth — the northern latitudes, the Arctic and the tropics — are getting wetter, while the middle latitudes — the arid and semi-arid parts of the world — are getting drier and suffering more drought, Famiglietti told Goldenberg.

This is neither a fluke nor a short-term variation. These changes in precipitation reflect steady alterations in the planet's climate as the biosphere warms.

This means the hydrology of the planet and the availability of freshwater resources are changing, as are marine ecosystems.

Rising sea levels will increasingly push saltwater further up rivers and into coastal groundwater, and more powerful ocean storms will create tidal surges that flood coastal lowlands, notes a 2009 report from the Stimson Center titled "Troubled Waters: Climate Change, Hydropolitics and Transboundary Resources."

Drought and flooding, "both types of threats can impair food production, endanger public health, stress established settlement patterns and jeopardize livelihoods and social well-being," warns the report.

In the middle latitudes, less precipitation is not the sole problem. Unsustainable use of rivers and groundwater is rapidly drying up water sources that have fed, clothed and bathed humans for millennia.

Goldenberg noted that 600 million people inhabit a broad stretch of land across eastern Pakistan, north India and western Bangladesh that is "the most intensely irrigated" land in the world.

"Up to 75 percent of farmers rely on pumped groundwater to water their crops, and water use is intensifying," she noted.

"Over the last decade, groundwater was pumped out 70 percent faster than in the 1990s. Satellite measurements showed a staggering loss of 54 cu. km of groundwater a year. Indian farmers were pumping their way into a water crisis," she added.

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are already touchy neighbors at best. Lack of water could push hungry and thirsty villagers into water conflicts across state and national borders, and especially into confrontations over groundwater, which can be extremely difficult to quantify and share equitably.

In the Middle East, where armed conflict is already all too common, leaders are taking water shortage concerns very seriously.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has called water "a national security issue," and Goldenberg wrote that "shortages are so severe in the United Arab Emirates that the country is using non-conventional resources, including desalination, treated wastewater, rainwater harvesting and cloud seeding."

UAE Crown Prince General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan has said, “For us, water is (now) more important than oil,” she added.

Here on Japan’s main island, Honshu, we’re lucky. The closest we get to a fight over water is trying to decide who will get the last umbrella left outside the pub on a rainy evening.

But Japan, too, will have considerable changes to deal with, according to a 2008 WWF report, “Nippon Changes: Climate Impacts Threatening Japan Today and Tomorrow.”

Looking forward, projected climate changes include, temperature increases of 2 to 3 degrees Celsius over the next 100 years; an increase in mean precipitation by more than 10 percent over the 21st century and an increase in summer precipitation by 17-19 percent; and an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, such as tropical cyclones, heat waves and heavy-rainfall events.

The report projects a rise in sea level of 5 mm per year throughout the 21st century, which will pose a threat to 46 percent of the population and 47 percent of industrial output. The authors also expect an increase in the likelihood of inundation and intrusion of seawater into groundwater aquifers and increased erosion of coastal zones.

As for specific impacts on humans, here are a few to consider: Increased likelihood of infectious and vector and water-borne diseases; expansion of dengue fever into Hokkaido; increases in allergies and allergy-related diseases; increased cost of living and protection from more extreme weather events; deteriorated freshwater systems; 1.2-3.2 percent increase in the demand for water supply (with a 3-degree warming); negative impacts to fruit crops and an increase in abnormal fruits; and a 40 percent decrease in rice yields in central and southern Japan.

Japan will clearly have its hands full with climate-change impacts.

Could climate change and water crises abroad also draw Japan into a military conflict? What about the ISIS conflict?

With the third-lowest water reserves in the region, Jordan is struggling to cope with an influx of Syrian refugees, Goldenberg noted in her Guardian piece. And that was before the ISIS insurgency got into full swing.

Assuming Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gets his way and the Diet approves a reinterpretation of Japan's Constitution, we might soon see Japanese troops empowered to join collective security activities abroad, using military force in an international dispute.

What then if a Japanese ally joins efforts to contain the ISIS insurgency or provide humanitarian assistance?

Much sooner than anyone imagined, Japanese forces could find themselves in a war zone, or dealing with the spinoff from a water crisis very far from home.

"Too much, too little: Water crises abound", 21/06/2014, online at:

http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2014/06/21/environment/much-little-water-crises-abound/#.U7BoUpR_vE1

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❖ Is the UN turning its back on the human right to water?

One of the biggest threats to economic and social development is that the world's freshwater supplies are rapidly becoming scarce and polluted. A new set of actors are now engaging in the global development arena to define and write the rules of access to water.

It is alarming to see that the human right to water and sanitation continues to be marginalised in UN policy discussions. The exclusion of this right to water in the most recent draft of the sustainable development goals reveals policy more conducive to promoting water security for economic growth than ensuring the preservation of watersheds and the equitable distribution of scarce water supplies.

When the UN general assembly passed a resolution in 2010 affirming water and sanitation as a human right, it was celebrated as a victory for communities dealing with the health impacts of polluted water, the indignity of not having access to clean drinking water and sanitation or the inability to produce food owing to water shortages. Social movements saw the human right to water and sanitation as a tool in the fight against a global water crisis produced by inequality, social exclusion and abuse of the water commons.

The global water crisis is also a big concern for industries seeking secure access to water supplies to sustain and expand operations in a never-ending quest for economic growth. The extractive industries, large drinks companies, big banks investing in water stocks, and companies involved in providing water and sanitation services have positioned themselves as stakeholders within global water policy discussions and as being able to provide solutions to the crisis.

The latest trend in global and national water policy is for corporations to participate in decision-making bodies and promote corporate-driven solutions through public-private partnerships. Over the past decade or so, the efforts of corporations such as Nestlé and Unilever to engage in global water policy discussions has shifted the debate from one of injustice and inequality to a depoliticised discussion of scarcity solved by technological fixes. These are offered by multinational corporations and market mechanisms that further deregulate water resource allocation.

When global policymakers – including the working group on sustainable development goals (SDGs) – focus simply on improving "water efficiency" for these ever-expanding industries without anchoring discussions of access to water as a right, they are ignoring communities that are challenging the very presence of the industries that are destroying watersheds.

The human right to water and sanitation holds promise for these communities. It has been invoked in Plachimada, in south India, to challenge Coca Cola's access to aquifers; by anti-mining activists throughout Latin America; and, more recently, by the Kalahari Bushmen in a struggle to access traditional water sources on land coveted by industries such as tourism, diamond mining and fracking.

It has also been used to democratise water and sanitation services. In Uruguay, recognition of the human right to water led to the ban of private water services. When a recent ruling by a top Greek court blocked the privatisation of the country's largest water utility, in Athens, it was a victory for activists across Europe who had condemned forced privatisation through loan conditions in bailout packages for Greece, Portugal and Italy.

So it is deeply troubling that the human right to water continues to be contested at the UN. For those living without access to adequate drinking water and sanitation, the SDG on water focuses on universal access. As special rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque argues that an emphasis on universality alone fails to eliminate inequality.

At the very minimum, the human right to water calls for the elimination of discrimination and the adoption of special measures for marginalised communities. Social movements pursuing public control over water supplies, and democratic and participatory governance models, are also drawn to the elements of public participation in decision-making, accountability and access to justice underscored by the human right to water.

While this right is hardly the silver bullet for all global water woes, it goes a long way towards balancing unequal power relationships.

“Is the UN turning its back on the human right to water?”, 19/06/2014, online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/jun/19/un-human-right-water-access-goal>

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❖ Central Asia's Growing Water Wars

After emerging from the implosion of the USSR more than two decades ago, the Central Asian basin has had more than its fair share of problems, including hyperinflation, stalled political reforms, terrorism, rising drug use and unsettled borders.

Looming above all these however is water – the most divisive issue in Central Asia. The problem is the region's inequitable distribution of hydrological resources – alpine Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have a surfeit of water, while downstream Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are water stressed.

At the heart of the looming disputes are the 1,500-mile Amu Darya and 1,380-mile Syr Darya rivers. The Amu Darya's headwaters in the form of the Panj River arise in Tajikistan, while the Syr Darya originates in Kyrgyzstan. Besides river water, Tajikistan also contains many glaciers, of which the 270-square-mile Fedenko glacier is the largest in the world outside the Polar Regions. The glacier melt of the two rivers, which originate in the Pamir and Tien Shan mountain ranges, meander westwards through Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan before emptying into the largely desiccated Aral Sea.

Like so many problems in the post-Soviet space, Central Asia's water issues date back to the early Soviet era, when beginning in 1918, efforts began to divert Central Asian water toward agriculture to gain a market share in the global cotton trade, which in the 1940s led to the building of a massive network of irrigation project, launching a sustained agricultural development program that was to last to the end of the Soviet era and beyond.

The Amu Darya and Syr Darya water flows, whose combined flow before massive Soviet agricultural projects were implemented equaled the Nile, are unique in that, until 1991, they were part of a single country, the Soviet Union, with water management policy directed by Moscow. The amount of water taken from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya doubled between 1960 and 2000, allowing cotton production to nearly double in the same period. By the 1980s, nearly 90 percent of water use in Central Asia was directed toward agriculture, primarily cotton production, with the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya supplying nearly 75 percent of the water flow.

It is sustaining this Soviet cotton agricultural legacy that so concerns Uzbekistan with the water policies of its upstream neighbors Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Shortly after independence, the five countries agreed to maintain the Soviet-era water quota system, but competing national needs rendered the agreement unworkable. Further aggravating problems surrounding the headwaters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, in the wake of the 1992-97 Tajik civil war and the decline of Kyrgyzstan's economy, aquatic facilities fell into disrepair. Following independence, Central Asian leaders recognized the problem of developing a new, post-Soviet regional water policy; in 1993 the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek presidents established the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination to harmonize their water policies. But while the ICWC has since held more than 50 meetings, little has been accomplished; in the ensuing vacuum, each nation has increasingly developed nationalist policies, often to the detriment of its neighbors.

The failure to develop a coordinated approach while staying wedded to fraying, inefficient Soviet-era water policies is most dramatically illustrated in the shrinkage of the Aral Sea. The Aral was once the world's fourth-largest inland sea with an area of 28,000 square miles. Its slow demise began in the early 1960s, when massive Soviet Central Asian canal projects siphoned off increasing amounts of the Amu Darya's and Syr Darya's waters into inefficiently irrigated fields, where increasing demands of diverted water for cotton production occurred in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The rising diversion of the rivers' waters eventually shrank the Aral Sea to approximately 8,920 square miles, separating it into the northern "Small Sea" in Kazakhstan and the southern "Large Sea" in Uzbekistan, while the toxic saline and fertilizer-laced wastelands uncovered by the sea's retreat blew throughout Eurasia.

The rivers together contain more than 90 percent of Central Asia's available water resources but hydrocarbon poor upstream states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are interested in building massive hydroelectric projects that the downstream countries fear will lessen water flow. Kyrgyzstan wants to build the Kambarata hydroelectric cascade, Tajikistan the massive 3,600-megawatt Vakhsh River Rogun dam, which downstream Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan all fear could damage their agriculture. Rogun, a Soviet legacy, was begun in 1976 and 44-50 percent of the station was completed before 1991. The project was recommenced in 2007.

Driving this hydroelectric construction are economic concerns. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, facing rising natural gas prices from Uzbekistan, see increasing their hydroelectric potential as a growth sector in the form of electricity exports to South Asia. This in turn means that water discharges for power generation increasingly take precedence over the agricultural concerns of their downstream

neighbors, with increased water discharges in the winter months for electricity generation rather than the spring and summer for the irrigation needs of downstream neighbors.

Tajikistan has few immediate options but to attempt to develop its hydropower assets. Only 7 percent of Tajikistan's land is arable, and the U.S. government estimated that the country's 2007 oil production was a paltry 280 barrels per day. In 2006 Tajikistan produced only one billion cubic feet (bcf) of natural gas, forcing it to import 44 bcf to meet demand. The hydrocarbon situation is equally dire in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, whose 15 hydroelectric stations generate 92.5 percent of domestically consumed electricity. Overall, Uzbekistan consumes more than 50 percent of the two rivers' flow for its cotton production, while in Turkmenistan, the Amu Darya's waters are used exclusively for agriculture as it flows onward through Uzbekistan to the Aral Sea. Kazakhstan's water relations with neighboring states are determined by its significant dependence on their river flows, which account for 44 percent of Kazakhstan's surface water resources.

Fortunately for the Stans an interested outside powers a diplomatic solution exists – the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1997 after 27 years of negotiation, whose Article 5 states, "Watercourse States shall in their respective territories utilize an international watercourse in an equitable and reasonable manner."

As if underscoring the intricacies of aquatic issues, the convention has yet to enter into force, as to enter into force, it requires ratification by 35 countries but only 29 have done so. While Uzbekistan has ratified the convention, it is the only Central Asian country to do so.

What is certain is that the worldwide problem of transnational rivers will only intensify in the future. In September 2012, during a meeting of 40 former leaders in Oslo, former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien somberly noted that the world needs to find the equivalent of the flow of 20 Nile Rivers by 2025 to grow enough food to feed a rising global population and avoid conflicts over water scarcity. According to UN statistics, more than 80 nations in the world face water scarcity, while drought and desertification threaten the livelihoods of more than 1.2 billion people.

All nations interested in Central Asian security should ratify and urge Central Asian nations to support the UN Convention, and broaden investment beyond energy to improving regional

agriculture and lessening water use, as the Central Asian nations themselves have been unable to implement such policies. Otherwise, along with the drug trade and extremism, water conflict could become the third horseman of a regional apocalypse.

“Central Asia’s Growing Water Wars”, 17/06/2014, online at: <http://www.silkroadreporters.com/2014/06/17/central-asias-growing-water-wars/>

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❖ Indian officials order Coca-Cola plant to close for using too much water

Mehdiganj plant at centre of protests accused of extracting too much groundwater and releasing pollutants above limits

Authorities in northern India have ordered the closure of a Coca-Cola bottling plant at the centre of protests that it is extracting too much groundwater, an official said Wednesday.

An anti-pollution official said the Mehdiganj plant in Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh had breached the conditions of its operating licence, prompting the order closure earlier this month.

"The plant is closed following our orders," Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board member secretary J.S. Yadav told AFP.

"They have also been asked to take suitable measures to recharge the depleting groundwater level by twice the amount they have extracted.

"Also, the effluents released by the plant contain pollutants beyond the permissible limits."

The plant was also asked to produce a permission certificate from a government agency that regulates ground water use, Yadav said.

The company has appealed the closure order to India's environment court, the National Green Tribunal, he said.

Coca-Cola, the world's largest soft-drinks maker which has consistently denied the allegations, could not immediately be contacted for comment.

The Indian unit of the company hit a hurdle earlier this year when local authorities said they would demolish the plant, claiming it was built on village council land and was "illegal".

The authorities also imposed a 126,000 rupee (\$2,000) fine on Hindustan Coca-Cola Company Private Limited, over the land issue.

India is one of Coke's fastest-growing markets thanks to an expanding middle class.

The bottling plant, one of 58 that Atlanta-based Coca-Cola has in India, has been at the centre of protests for years. Demonstrators accuse the company of creating major water shortages through excessive extraction of water and of polluting groundwater and soil.

Coke last year announced the completion of work to expand the Varanasi bottling facility which can produce 600 polyethylene terephthalate bottles a minute.

“Indian officials order Coca-Cola plant to close for using too much water”, 18/06/2014, online at:
http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jun/18/indian-officals-coca-cola-plant-water-mehdiganj?utm_source=Circle+of+Blue+WaterNews+%26+Alerts&utm_campaign=76814f2faa-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c1265b6ed7-76814f2faa-250657169

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❖ **A quarter of India's land is turning into desert-minister**

(Reuters) - About a quarter of India's land is turning to desert and degradation of agricultural areas is becoming a severe problem, the environment minister said, potentially threatening food security in the world's second most populous country.

India occupies just 2 percent of the world's territory but is home to 17 percent of its population, leading to over-use of land and excessive grazing. Along with changing rainfall patterns, these are the main causes of desertification.

"Land is becoming barren, degradation is happening," said Prakash Javadekar, minister for environment, forests and climate change. "A lot of areas are on the verge of becoming deserts but it can be stopped."

Land degradation - largely defined as loss of productivity - is estimated at 105 million hectares, constituting 32 percent of the total land.

According to the Indian Space Research Organisation that prepared a report on desertification in 2007, about 69 percent of land in the country is dry, making it vulnerable to water and wind erosion, salinization and water logging.

The states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are the among the most arid. These are some of the cotton and rapeseed growing states of India.

"A quarter of India's land is turning into desert-minister", 18/06/2014, online at:

http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/18/india-desertification-idUSL4N0OZ1FW20140618?utm_source=Circle+of+Blue+WaterNews+%26+Alerts&utm_campaign=76814f2faa-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c1265b6ed7-76814f2faa-250657169

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❖ Picture the World as a Desert

UNITED NATIONS, Jun 17 2014 (IPS) - Try to imagine an expanse of barren land, stretching for miles, with no trace of greenery, not a single bough to cast a sliver of shade, or a trickle of water to moisten the parched earth. Now imagine that desert expanding by 12 million hectares a year. Why? Because it's already happening.

Studies show that 24 billion tons of fertile soils are being eroded each year, while two billion hectares of land are badly degraded as a result of desertification. Dry lands in sub-Saharan Africa alone are set to increase by 15 percent in the next decade.

Globally, some 1.5 billion people stand on the edge of an arid precipice, their lands, lives and livelihoods threatened by an encroaching dust bowl.

It is against this backdrop that the United Nations marks the World Day to Combat Desertification (WDCD), complete with sombre warnings from some of its highest-level officials.

“With the world population rising, it is urgent we work to build the resilience of all productive land resources and the communities that depend on them,” U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon stressed in a message delivered from Bonn, Germany, Tuesday.

“A good example of ecosystem-based adaptation can be seen in Niger, where farmer-managed natural regeneration has brought back five million hectares of land.” -- Louise Baker, senior adviser on partnership building and resource mobilisation with the UNCCD

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) is predicting a 50-percent increase in demand for food by 2050, even while scientists warn that yields of major crops like wheat, rice and maize could decline by 20 percent in the coming decade due to hotter temperatures.

Scarcities of staple products could lead to the absorption of more land for industrialised agriculture, which has proven itself to be a major driver of global warming, directly accounting for 15 to 30 percent of carbon and methane emissions worldwide, which in turn feed desertification.

Red-flagging these many converging and interconnected crises, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) assigned WDCD 2014 the theme ‘Land Belongs to the Future – Let’s Climate Proof it.’

Ecosystem-based adaptation

Thirty-five percent of the earth's surface is comprised of drylands, including savannahs, scrublands and dry forests, which collectively sequester 36 percent of the world's carbon stocks and support 50 percent of all livestock.

These naturally occurring drylands provide excellent examples for regenerating or remediating degraded soil and have inspired a solution to desertification known as ecosystem-based adaptation, which aims to “strengthen natural systems to cushion the worst impacts of climate change.”

“A good example of ecosystem-based adaptation can be seen in Niger, where farmer-managed natural regeneration has brought back five million hectares of land,” Louise Baker, senior adviser on partnership building and resource mobilisation with the UNCCD, told IPS.

“Small changes in land use techniques – such as terracing, or the installation of water harvesting tanks – can make a big difference to the land a person owns and works,” she added.

Investment Versus Innovation

While the Bank's officials have called repeatedly for increased investment and financing to tackle climate change and build resilience to future shocks, UNCCD's Baker believes that simple realignment of existing funds and land management techniques could play an even bigger role.

“Soil alone could help sequester up to three billion tons of carbon a year, representing up to a third of potential mitigation capacity that can be achieved by simply changing how we manage the land and soil,” she told IPS.

“There are approximately two billion hectares of degraded land around the world with the capacity to be brought back, and about 480 million hectares of abandoned agricultural land that could be returned to production – not through additional investment but a realignment of priorities.

“For instance, investment in fertiliser use may be important; but if we invested instead in incentives to improve sustainable land management we would be able to get carbon back into the soil and help populations become more resilient to climate change rather than rely on fertilised production.

“It’s a matter of realigning funding flows so that you power adaptation by nature, rather than try and buy it,” she concluded.

“After that it’s up to governments and larger land owners to connect those dots and create a mosaic of land uses that, together, constitute quite a resilient package.”

At a ceremony held at the World Bank headquarters in Washington DC Tuesday, the UNCCD awarded its prestigious Land for Life Award to two organisations working to combat desertification through ecosystem adaptation in local communities.

Hailing from central Afghanistan’s arid Bamyan province, the Conservation Organisation for Afghan Mountain Areas (COAM) has eased pressure on the region’s vulnerable rangelands by 50 percent through tireless efforts to plant trees, provide green technology solutions to over 300 villages and create gravity-fed irrigation systems.

And in Mongolia – 78 percent of which is affected by desertification – the Green Asia Network (GAN) has mobilised its 25,000-strong volunteer army to plant trees all across the arid landscape. Climate refugees who once left Mongolia’s desertified regions have returned as GAN volunteers to a place they scarcely recognise beneath its newfound greenery.

Scores of people gathered at the World Bank to recognise the achievements of these dedicated individuals and press for similar action at the international level.

Preaching conservation, practicing investment

But some activists say the World Bank itself is partly to blame for the conjoined problems of climate change, food insecurity and desertification, by pushing its agenda of large-scale agriculture and mono-crop plantations on the developing world.

A campaign called ‘Our Land, Our Business’, launched jointly by the Oakland Institute (OI) together with a host of NGOs and farmer organisations from around the world, seeks to “hold the World Bank accountable for its role in the rampant theft of land and resources from some of the world’s poorest people – farmers, pastoralists, and indigenous communities, who are currently feeding 80 percent of the developing world,” according to a Mar. 31 press release.

The advocacy groups blame the Bank's 'Doing Business' rankings – scored according to Washington officials' opinions on how "easy" it is to work in a certain country – for forcing heads of developing states to relax environmental regulations, violate labour laws and deregulate their economies in the hope of attracting foreign investment.

And investment in the global South, according to OI's policy director Frederic Mousseau, "is mostly about agriculture and the extraction of natural resources."

"Thanks to reforms and policies guided by the Bank," charged OI, "Sierra Leone has taken 20 percent of its arable land from rural populations and leased it to foreign sugar cane and palm oil producers.

"And in Liberia, British, Malaysian, and Indonesian palm-oil giants have secured long-term leases for over 1.5 million acres of land formerly held by local communities," the organisation added.

"These policies are the exact opposite of what we need to combat desertification," Mousseau told IPS, "which can only be achieved through diversification of agriculture, afro-forestry, inter-cropping, and other techniques practiced by small farmers."

"In Mali, for instance, small farmers living around the Niger River are seeking government support to practice traditional agriculture on the riverbank. Instead the government has given 500,000 hectares of the most fertile land to 22 foreign and domestic investors for the production of agro-fuels and mono-crops," he added.

"This is a country where the World Bank has been very active, implementing policies that benefit foreign investors while eating up Mali's resources."

Until these policies are dealt with on a macro-level, local efforts at adaptation and mitigation do not stand much of a chance at success.

"Picture the World as a Desert", 17/06/2014, online at: http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/06/picture-world-desert/?utm_source=Circle-of-Blue+WaterNews+%26+Alerts&utm_campaign=76814f2faa-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c1265b6ed7-76814f2faa-250657169

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