

Conflicts arise over water supply

Paul Mitchell
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'People generally regard June 5, 1967 as the day the Six Day War began. That is the official date. But in reality, it started two and a half years earlier, on the day Israel decided to act against the diversion of the Jordan.' These were the words of General Ariel Sharon, later to be Israel's Defence Minister. In 1964, Arab nations had met and decided to divert the river Jordan, thus depriving Israel of its main supply of water.

Throughout history, rivers have been sources of conflict, as well as 'cradles of civilisation'. Ancient societies on the Nile in Egypt, the Tigris and Euphrates in the Middle East, the Indus in Pakistan and the Hwang Ho in China built large irrigation systems and made the land productive. The collapse of these civilisations was closely connected with the failure of water supplies. Today the potential for more devastating and widespread conflicts exists.

With the development of capitalism, there was a dramatic increase in the need for water. Populations grew and cities developed. Irrigation, electrical generation and industry required vast amounts of water. There is plenty to go around. Nearly three-quarters of the earth's surface is water but the provision of water supplies is chaotic and piecemeal. There is often intense competition for water resources between neighbouring countries, regions and towns. Upstream nations see little benefit for stopping pollution or maintaining the flow of rivers for nations downstream. Countries will pump dry underground water that stretches under their neighbours.

An additional source of conflict is the global market. Transnational companies look very closely at infrastructure costs such as water supplies before they make a decision to invest. Federal and local governments have to provide it at the right price, quality and quantity to attract them.

Water has become a tradable commodity. This month, the environment ministry in Ontario issued a

permit allowing a Canadian company to pump water from Lake Superior to export to Asia. Barry Appleton, a Toronto trade lawyer, said, 'Trade in water is here. This is a fundamental change.' The response of the Canadian federal government or the US government is not clear, but the Great Lakes were a key issue in the discussions on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Global warming could also have disastrous consequences. In a recent report, the environmental group, Greenpeace, warned of the possibility of serious social and political conflicts arising from increasing water shortages and the spread of deserts

From time to time various experts warn about an impending catastrophe. Governments may make a regional agreement and the United Nations some international laws. However, the agreements and laws are forgotten as soon as the first drought occurs. Disputes break out which often last for decades. Sometimes they lead to open warfare.

Ismail Serageldin of the World Bank predicted in 1995, 'Many of the wars of this century were about oil, but wars in the next century will be over water.' Eighty countries with 40 percent of the world's population, he continued, do not have enough water for industry, agriculture and health.

As a result of the various Arab-Israeli wars, Israel now controls most of the water in the Jordan. Ariel Sharon, now Israeli Minister of National Infrastructure, caused further uproar last year. He decided that the site of a dam on the Yarmuk, a tributary of the Jordan, should be moved upstream from the Israel-Jordan frontier into the demilitarised zone next to Syria. The dam was part of the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty of 1994 and is badly needed to help short supplies in Jordan. Consumption per person in Israel each day is about 300 litres, about the same as in London. In Jordan it is about 80 litres.

Turkey lies in the same sensitive area and has built 22 dams and 19 power plants in the east of the country since the 1970s. The loss of water has cut the flow in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, lifelines for Syria and Iraq, by almost two-thirds.

In 1995, the Turkish president, Suleyman Demirel, proclaimed: 'Neither Syria nor Iraq can lay claim to Turkey's rivers any more than Ankara could claim their oil.... We have a right to do anything we like. The water resources are Turkey's, the oil resources are theirs. We don't say we share the oil resources and they cannot share our water resources.'

In May 1997 the United Nations agreed on an International Watercourses Convention by 104 votes to 3. Turkey was one of the three countries who voted against. Israel, Egypt and Iraq were amongst those who abstained or did not attend.

A conference on water finance was held in Istanbul last October. One financial analyst said the disputes over water are a key influence in Turkey's moves to create new regional alliances and stop what he called a 'unified Syrian / Iraq and pan-Arab front on cross border issues.'

Demirel pleaded for regional co-operation. He told the *International Herald Tribune*, 'a scarce, yet ultimately vital resource such as water can only be efficiently used when managed on a regional scale.' However the next month the Iraqi foreign ministry protested to the Arab League because Turkey plans to build yet another dam on the Tigris. 'Turkey is trying to control the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and prevent Iraq and Syria from irrigating land that relied on the two water resources since the dawn of history,' they declared.

The Syrians attacked Turkey because it has not attended a meeting since 1992 of the joint committee set up to investigate the Euphrates. The river is so polluted that it is 'affecting the environment and causing new diseases that were non-existent before,' they added. They claim it is now too salty to be used for irrigation.

A few days ago another warning was issued on this and other areas of conflict. Mahmoud Abu-Zeid, Egypt's minister of water resources and president of the World Water Council, said at its meeting in Cairo, 'It's our responsibility now to act to avert a water catastrophe.' Two-thirds of the world's population will

be hit by water shortages by 2020, he added.

Whilst water remains a commodity to be fought over by rival nation states, the supply of this vital resource will continue to be threatened by selfish national interests. Water provision must be developed on a rational and planned international basis if future catastrophes are to be avoided.



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