

# Britain's Labour government agrees to finance controversial Turkish Ilisu dam project

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31 December 1999

The Blair Labour government has become embroiled in a row with human rights organisations and environmental groups over its decision to provide finance for the Ilisu dam project in Turkey.

On December 21, Trade and Industry Secretary Stephen Byers announced that the government was "minded" to fund the dam's construction in southeast Turkey. The declaration followed construction firm Balfour Beatty's request for a government-approved export credit guarantee of up to £200 million, to cover its role in an international consortium. Balfour Beatty was earlier involved in a scandal over the controversial Pergau Dam project in Malaysia during the 1980s, which was criticised as unsuitable on environmental grounds. The UK aid package for its construction—agreed by the then Conservative government—was tied to Malaysia continuing to buy arms from British weapons manufacturers.

The Ilisu dam is part of the massive development programme known as the South East Anatolia Project (GAP), involving 22 dams on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Turkey says the GAP scheme will enable hundreds of thousands of hectares of land to be irrigated, and will generate electricity. The consortium building the Ilisu dam includes American, German and Swiss firms (who are also seeking financial backing from their own governments) and is to be led by the Swiss company Sulzer Hydro.

The project has been widely condemned on a number of fronts. The dam will be created by flooding a wide area of south-east Turkey, where 95 percent of the population are Kurds, leaving tens of thousands homeless. Estimates suggest the Ilisu scheme would flood 15 Kurdish towns and 52 villages, leaving 16,000 people homeless and adversely affecting the lives of a further 20,000. It would also submerge the ancient archaeological heritage site of Hasankeyf—the only Anatolian town to have survived since the Middle Ages—granted "complete archaeological protection" in 1978 by Turkey's Department of Culture.

The Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) in London described backing for the scheme as "tantamount to support for a human rights disaster in the making". On November 24 it

published a report into the Ilisu hydroelectric plant, based on material gathered by a KHRP fact-finding delegation. The report describes the project as "part of the ongoing attempt to annihilate the Kurds as an ethnic group, by destroying their most important cultural sites". The GAP scheme has already displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people, many without compensation, KHRP charge, and the local Kurdish population have been denied any say in the decision making. In a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair the KHRP describe how "South east Turkey has been plagued by human rights abuse for many years, as the Kurds are denied their basic human rights".

The Turkish government has pursued a 15-year war against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which has conducted an armed struggle for an independent Kurdish state in the southeast of the country. In the course of the war, at least 30,000 people have been killed and a state of emergency has been imposed in nine southeastern provinces since 1984. A US State Department report issued February 26, 1999, "Turkey—Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998", explains that the Turkish government is engaged in the mass ethnic cleansing of Kurds. "The exact number of persons forcibly displaced from villages in the southeast since 1984 is unknown. Most estimates agree that 2,600 to 3,000 villages and hamlets have been depopulated. A few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) put the number of persons forcibly displaced as high as 2 million. On the low end, the government reported that through 1997 the total number of evacuees was 336,717. A figure given by a former MP from the region—560,000—appears to be the most credible estimate of those forcibly evacuated."

Friends of the Earth (FoE) in Britain has also condemned the scheme, saying that it contravenes the Labour government's professed "ethical foreign policy" and recently announced environmental guidelines. There are other ways of solving Turkey's power shortage, the group state, such as investing in Turkey's electricity grid system.

Most seriously, FoE points out that the World Bank had refused to fund GAP for environmental reasons and because of fears that it would increase the danger of conflict between

Turkey and its southern neighbours, Syria and Iraq, as both countries depend on the river Tigris for fresh drinking water. Under the United Nations convention on shared rivers, Syria and Iraq would both have to agree to the dam, but neither has been consulted. They have expressed concern that by controlling river flow, Turkey would be able to shut off their water supply. They have already complained about the amount of water they have been getting—which has dropped by about two-thirds—since the completion of the first Turkish dams at the beginning of the 1990s. Both countries have objected to the GAP project, as has the Arab League, which appealed to British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook "not to stoke the fires of discord between nations".

Tony Juniper from FoE said, "we have to stop this project before the British government is party to fermenting war in the Middle East." The planned site is only 40 miles upstream from the Turkish/Iraqi/Syrian border. Turkey has conducted air strikes and incursions into Kurdish-controlled Northern Iraq and threatened war against Syria if the latter did not withdraw its support for the PKK. Following the Gulf War in 1992, former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali warned that the next war in the Middle East would be fought over water. Analysts have said control of the waterways in the Middle East, where water is at a premium, is a key means through which Turkey is seeking to create new regional alliances and stop a united pan-Arab front developing on cross-border issues.

Byers said that the financing would be dependent on the Turkish government "drawing up an internationally acceptable resettlement programme and ensuring water quality and downstream water flows were maintained". FoE described these conditions as minimal.

After the threat of a court action by FoE, the government was forced to publish details of two government-commissioned reports on the proposed site that it had been seeking to keep out of the public eye. A 1997 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) commissioned by Sulzer Hydro has not been released to the public, despite numerous requests, but the government-commissioned EIA report highlighted numerous environmental drawbacks to the scheme, including the fact that water-borne disease such as malaria may increase as a result.

Along with other material, FoE said that the two reports—the *Environmental Review of Ilisu Dam Project* and the *Stakeholders' Attitudes to Involuntary Resettlement in the Context of the Ilisu Dam Project*—revealed "many fundamental failings in the project". Rather than having to secure the agreement of downstream states and establish legally enforceable treaties, the British government has only sought "assurances" from Turkey that downstream flows will be maintained. There has been no serious evaluation made of alternatives to the project. The Turkish government has yet to prepare a resettlement plan for the displaced people, or even seek their views, despite the fact that the vast majority of the

population in the area is opposed to the project.

If the government confirms it will back the scheme—(a final decision is expected by Easter 2000)—FoE has threatened a further court action.

According to press reports, the decision to extend export guarantees to Balfour Beatty was taken despite significant opposition from within the Labour leadership. Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and Trade Secretary Byers were all said to be against the scheme, but were overruled by Blair. In parliament, Byers insisted that the decision had been taken by "the whole Government" rather than by his department.

Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper December 23, environmental expert George Monbiot said that Labour's involvement in the project "may be the biggest corruption scandal in western Europe". And complained that "Our government, which went to war in the spring to stop ethnic cleansing, is, in the winter, underwriting it".

Blair's support for the project does not contradict his previous avowal of human rights. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the Western powers' opposition to ethnic cleansing depends on who is doing it, and what is in it for them. The US State Department report on Turkey was released one month before the Western powers began their bombardment of Yugoslavia, supposedly in order to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Kosova Albanians by the Serbian authorities. Knowledge of far greater atrocities against the Kurds did not interfere with diplomatic and military backing from the American and European governments for Turkey, nor the latter's own participation in the war against Serbia. Turkey occupies a strategic position close to the Caspian Sea and the adjoining regions of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—considered the most important region for oil in the twenty-first century. The country has also applied for European Union membership, and British firms stand to make large amounts of money from lucrative construction projects.



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