

Serious water shortage in Turkey

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Ankara, Turkey's capital and home to more than 4.5 million people, has been in the grips of a serious water shortage for the last three weeks.

On August 1, the director general of the State Hydraulic Works (DSI) announced that Ankara had enough water for just 78 days and that the water level in the city's reservoirs had fallen to 5.5 percent of capacity, down from last year's 23 percent. At the time of writing, the level in the reservoirs is a meagre 3.5 percent of capacity, which corresponds to a water supply of fewer than two months.

On August 2, the city's mayor, Melih Gokcek, announced that Ankara would be divided into two sections and each section would alternately receive water for two days for a certain period of time. The last time water cuts occurred in Ankara was in 1992.

However, Gokcek's scheme didn't work as planned. Water cuts at two-day intervals turned into a nightmare for some districts with three-day, four-day and even longer water cuts. Even worse, on August 4 and 6, some parts of the city suffered badly from flooding due to the bursting of water mains. As a result, a number of spontaneous mass protests erupted.

After the water main bursting, the municipality announced that water could not be supplied to the entire city for a period of three days. As a result, a health crisis developed. Due to the water shortage, some hospitals stopped admitting patients except for urgent cases, while some delayed non-vital surgical operations. Moreover, the water shortage increased the risk of disease. According to health experts, the pressure shifts in the pipes adversely affect the quality of the water. Also, some people, particularly those living in poorer districts of the city, drank water taken from artificial ponds and fountains.

The water shortage in the capital city caused international embarrassment for the national Justice and Development Party (AKP) government: some foreign embassies were forced to rent hotel rooms, while others postponed official functions.

Last week, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan directly intervened and summoned Mayor Gokcek, a member of the same AKP, to demand an explanation, acknowledging that the party's public image was seriously damaged due to this crisis. After the meeting, Erdogan told the press that "Gokcek realised his mistake." Gokcek echoed his leader: "I have committed a mistake by cutting the water supply, which created an atmosphere of chaos."

On August 19, Gokcek organised a press conference and announced that "water cuts in the capital will come to an end." He justified this decision by saying that "figures indicated a decline in Ankara's water consumption."

The decision by Gokcek and his local government is an admission that they are incapable of implementing water rationing in an orderly fashion. This is mainly due to the poor condition and maintenance of the pipeline system. Following Erdogan's intervention, AKP leaders decided to take a gamble and wait for heavy autumn rains to occur, as it is not possible to bring additional water to Ankara before December.

However, the Turkish Meteorology Department (DMI) recently declared, "Even if seasonal rains arrive on time, a lengthy period of time is needed before we will see the positive impact of such rainfall." DMI added: "Temperatures all across Turkey will be two to four degrees higher than average in the period between August and October." This means that evaporation of existing water stocks will continue unabated.

While the Islamist media has been trying to excuse the local government and Gokcek, the mainstream bourgeois media accused him of neglect and bad management, particularly for allowing unhindered water consumption until after the national elections.

Clearly, the need to avoid taking such an unpopular step as cutting water consumption was bound up with the electoral ambitions of the AKP (which ended up winning 47.5 percent of the vote in Ankara in the July 22 balloting, compared to 38.1 percent in 2002). But it would be too simplistic to reduce the problem merely to that.

Several newspapers recently revealed that Ankara, like all other Turkish cities, lacks needed financial resources. According to these news reports, the State Hydraulic Works officially warned the municipality in June 2004 and pointed to the need for a project (bringing water from Gerede) to prevent a possible water shortage. Gokcek officially responded to this warning by saying that the municipality's priority was to complete the subway system. The daily newspaper *Hurriyet* quoted him as saying, "We will not be able to be involved in the financing of the water supply project because we must secure our financial resources for the priority project. It is deemed appropriate by our municipality that the [Gerede] project be fully covered by the resources of DSI."

Although Gokcek deliberately sacrificed this vital water

supply project, the construction of the Ankara subway (none of Turkey's major cities, including Istanbul, home to more than 12 million people, has a proper subway system) has been progressing very slowly due to lack of money. In return, the DSI refused to invest in the Gerede project.

The principal reason for the latter decision was the current International Monetary Fund programme that requires the government to run an annual budget surplus of at least 6.5 percent of GDP.

This austerity measure sucks up all the resources of the Turkish economy in the name of debt servicing. Reaching the 6.5 percent target has only been possible through severely squeezing public expenditures, including investments on infrastructure by local governments.

For the same reason, Istanbul and neighbouring cities, which are predicted to be the site of a major earthquake some time in the next quarter-century, are only investing a fraction of what is needed to minimize the effects of this potential disaster. Turkish Meteorology Department Director General Adnan Unal commented cynically that "Turks must learn to live with drought just as they are living with the risk of an earthquake."

The water crisis in Ankara revealed the true colours of the Islamist AKP. On several occasions, Ankara Mayor Gokcek made comments attributing the water shortage in the capital to the "will of God." During his first press conference on the issue, the mayor recommended that Ankara residents pray for rain and added, "We didn't presume that God would allow such a disaster.... God knows everything. If He wills, we will have an end to it. God willing, this disaster may end within a day."

He repeated his call for the population to pray for rain during a subsequent press conference: "We are bringing water. But if God doesn't will it, the water sources go dry. So I call on all to pray for rain."

To escape any responsibility for the situation, Gokcek blamed the water shortage on global warming, an external factor entirely beyond his control; but for him this is also something decided by the "Almighty."

When asked by a correspondent from channel NTV, the mayor of Istanbul, Kadir Topbas (AKP), also supported calls for special prayers in Ankara as well as in Istanbul and wherever necessary: "In times of trouble, our people seek Allah's help for problems that they cannot solve. This is natural."

In addition to revealing his reactionary ideology, Gokcek's attitude has also been arrogant and aggressive. Again in front of the cameras, he advised Ankara's residents to take an extended leave and go visit their relatives or take a holiday. "If 50-60,000 of Ankara residents go and live together with their families elsewhere we will not be compelled to start providing water in three- or four-day intervals."

Gokcek also accused the various health institutions and experts of exaggerating the situation for ideological

purposes—this is typical of Islamist politicians when they face difficulties. He denounced the protests against the water situation as a conspiracy and a few days ago sought to explain the burst water mains by sabotage.

Although the water shortage has already reached a crisis level in Ankara, the situation also looks bleak in other cities.

In general, Turkey has been experiencing a dramatic decline in the level of its fresh-water supply. The newspapers are full of pictures of arid, cracked soil, accompanied by gloomy reports of the drying up of a river, lake or reservoir.

Reservoir levels in Istanbul averaged 31.8 percent of capacity on August 1, then plummeted to 23.3 percent within the space of 20 days. Experts point out that evaporation in the city's water supply due to high temperatures immensely contributes to this problem. DMI officials said that if there was not rain soon, Istanbul too would face a serious shortage of drinking water.

The third most populous city in Turkey, Izmir, seems in a better position at the moment, with 190-200 days of water supplies on hand. But Izmir could face a serious water shortage next year if sufficient rainfall does not occur during the coming rainy season.

The same applies to other cities on the Aegean coast, as well as the Thrace region; Konya, known as the country's "bread basket"; the city of Bursa; and the Cukurova valley, which is rich with cotton and wheat.

Water shortages have already taken their toll on agricultural production across the country. Millions of farmers have been adversely affected by the austerity measures of the IMF economic programme and several World Bank projects targeting the sector. The media is full of reports about water shortages adversely affecting the production of wheat, olives and olive oil, figs, grapes, sunflowers and sunflower oil, and cotton.

As a result, food prices may increase substantially in the near future, and this might put additional pressure on the Central Bank and its efforts to reduce inflation. No doubt, it would have a negative impact on Turkey's foreign trade balance and current account deficit as well.

The water shortages are also affecting the generation of electricity in the country. Officials and experts recently voiced their concerns about the performance of hydroelectric power plants should water levels fail to rise next year.



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