Spain's "water wars": A scramble for essential resources

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Disputes between Spain's autonomous regions are escalating over the country's ongoing water crisis. Government officials describe the present drought as the worst in a century. What has been dubbed a "water war" has exposed the inability of capitalism to organise essential resources.

Rainfall has fallen to 56 percent of its previous average over the last six months across Spain. The situation is sharpest in the northeastern region of Catalonia, where four years of dry weather have culminated in 18 months of extremely low rainfall. The Catalan Department of the Environment said last week that recent rain would only postpone emergency measures for a few weeks.

Nationally, reservoirs are running at about half of their capacity. According to official data, reservoirs in Catalonia are at just 20.1 percent of their capacity, only 0.1 percent above emergency levels. Water levels are so low that the village of Sant Roma, abandoned to make way for the construction of the Sau reservoir, is now clearly visible again above the waterline. The region has already imposed restrictions on water use, with bans on hosepipes and filling swimming pools, and city-centre fountains in Barcelona standing dry. "We cannot leave five million people without water to drink," said Miguel Iceta of the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC), which heads the regional government.

Responses to the crisis brought the Catalan government into conflict with the national Socialist Party (PSOE) government. The regional government's initial proposal was to divert 1.5 cubic hectometres of water per day from the Segre River, a tributary of the Ebro, to Barcelona. Francesc Baltasar, the regional Environment Minister, told a news conference that this was "the only viable way" of getting sufficient water in time to avert the crisis.

The Segre plan was opposed by the national government. The river also flows through neighbouring Aragon. Constitutionally, where rivers run through more than one of the country's 17 autonomous regions, the decision to divert resources must be taken at a national level. The government of Aragon also vigorously opposed the proposals. Much of the dispute between regions has been over the use of the water for the tourism industry. Catalonia accused Aragon of wishing to apply drinking water to its golf courses and hotels. This is not confined to these two regions. Marti Sabria, an hotelier's representative from Costa Brava, insisted, "If someone has to restrict the use of water, it should not be tourists."

The Catalan government was furious at the opposition to its proposals from Madrid. José Montilla of the PSC, regional premier, accused the PSOE of lacking solidarity. The PSC is the regional sister party of the ruling national PSOE and a crucial ally in government. Acknowledging that taking water from the source of a river is "not the best solution," Montilla insisted the proposal must remain open "if no other alternatives present solutions for 5.5 million citizens affected by drought."

Catalonia has been at the forefront of attempts by the regions to gain greater control over water resources. In 2005, a statute extending the region's autonomy awarded the Catalan government greater power over its rivers, prompting similar claims by other regions. These powers have not yet been approved by the national constitutional court. The rejection of the Segre proposals led to Montilla, head of a regional government pushing for greater autonomy, declaring plaintively, "Catalonia, too, is Spain". Baltasar declared that this was a "situation of national emergency."

The Catalan government has begun measures to import water. The Catalan Water Agency has contracted 10 ships to supply Barcelona with drinking water, at a cost of nearly €80 million (US$127 million). Some of the ships will bring water from Marseille, 300 kilometres away. August will see shipments of water from a desalination plant 600 kilometres away in Almeria, in the southeast of Spain, historically one of the country's driest regions. Some water may also be imported by train, and it is expected that the imports will continue for at least six months. The Catalan government hopes that its own desalination plant, near Barcelona, will be operational next year. In the meantime, it plans to spend €35 million upgrading port facilities, and €43 million in buying and transporting the water.

The national government's opposition to the Segre plan was ostensibly based on environmental concerns, as was its rejection of a larger proposal to divert water from the Ebro to coastal regions put forward in 2004.

The right-wing Popular Party (PP) had advanced a National Hydrological Plan (PHN) in 2001, when it was in power. Based predominantly on diverting water from the north to the south, it followed draft proposals in 1993 by an earlier PSOE government. However, it was opposed by northern regionalists, who wanted the water for their own economic development, as well as environmentalists. Reforming the PHN under pressure from these forces, the PSOE of José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero abandoned plans to divert the Ebro. Instead it has heavily promoted the building of desalination plants to turn seawater into drinking

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water. Spain now has 950 such plants, providing enough water for 10 million people.

Scientists have argued that desalination plants are a shortsighted measure that could exacerbate the crisis of water supplies in the areas at greatest risk of drought. They are expensive to use, and energy-intensive. The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) has argued that desalination plants may themselves have a damaging environmental impact, increasing salinity around the plant developments and destroying coastal areas. They also produce high emissions of greenhouse gases. The Spanish Association for the Technological Treatment of Water says that each desalination plant indirectly produces one million tonnes of CO2 a year.

The only way of ensuring the availability of water for all on an environmentally sustainable basis would be under a planned system completely at odds with the anarchy of the capitalist economy and its competition between regions, nations and their facilities. At one point during the dispute with the Catalan government, Madrid suggested an approach to the French government to propose diverting water from the Rhone. Though this would take a decade to implement, and Montilla denounced it as a "bad-taste joke", it did indicate the negative role of both national and regional divisions in social and economic life.

As an alternative to the Segre plan, Environment Minister Cristina Narbona also proposed a "water bank" which would allow farmers with irrigation rights to sell water to others. Agriculture is, in any case, reluctant to give up its irrigation rights— with recycled or "grey" water unfit for drinking used to water crops.

Zapatero's government was forced to recognise that the existing interim measures were insufficient. First Deputy Prime Minister Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega announced at the PSOE government's first weekly press conference since re-election that unless they acted, "the citizens of Barcelona will be without drinking water in October."

The government has announced emergency plans to build a 60-kilometre pipeline to pump 40 cubic hectometres of water per year from the mouth of the Ebro direct to Barcelona. This does not replace the plans to transport water, as the pipeline will not be completed until October. It is intended that the pipeline remain in operation until the desalination plant is completed. The PSOE say the pipeline, which will cost more than €170 million (US$270 million), will not deplete the Ebro because it will channel surplus water recovered by installing more efficient irrigation pipes in agriculture. Inefficiency in the infrastructure has long been recognised as a problem in Spanish water supplies, with up to 20 percent of transported water being lost through leaking pipes.

The national Environment Minister, Elena Espinosa, held a meeting for representatives of all of the regions to explain the plan to them. It has not deflected the criticisms. The farmers of the Ebro delta, where the pipeline is to be built, are anxious that construction will affect their crops. Many farmers have pointed out that they cannot now stop irrigating to lay new pipes as the rice-growing season has already started. Rosa Pruna, of the Catalan farmers' union ASAJA, said, "We don't want to be selfish, but rice is life itself in the delta. The government has had years to act, and now they have acted late and badly."

The Aragon government has expressed its unhappiness at the plan because it wants a controlling say in the use of the Ebro's water. The sharpest criticisms have come from the PP-run coastal regions of Murcia and Valencia, which have pledged to fight for equal access to the Ebro in the Constitutional Court. Valencia and Murcia were two of the regions affected by the cancellation of the Ebro-diversion plan in 2004.

Murcia's regional premier Ramon Luis Valcarcel has said the two regions may call demonstrations against government water policy. Valencia's regional premier Francisco Camps has accused Zapatero of "humiliating" the region, and the PP tabled a regional parliamentary motion calling on the PSOE to change its policy. Camps said he was not opposing the rights of the Catalans to have water, but was objecting to the denial of the same provisions to the people of the south. He believed his position would be upheld by the regional governments of Valencia, Murcia, and Andalusia.

The PP's responses and that of the PSOE are dictated by the need to sustain various competing aspects of Spanish business interests, rather than resolving the water resource problems of the majority of the Spanish people. Water resources are required in Valencia, Murcia, and Almeria to supply intensive agriculture. Many of the solutions proposed by environmentalists are openly framed in terms of punishing working people and benefiting business. Manuel Ramón Llamas, of Madrid's Complutense University, has blamed the crisis on low prices in Spain, insisting that higher prices to consumers would limit demand. Alberto Fernandez, head of water for the WWF, is encouraging the creation of water "banks" so that the rights to water can be bought and sold.

It is the market economy, which pits nation against nation and even region against region, which is preventing any organised administration of the world's water resources. Llamas admits that Spain has sufficient water, but no political structure capable of administrating it for the benefit of all. Edelmiro Rua Alvarez, of Spain's College of Engineers, has said, "Spain has enough water for everyone. We shouldn't be at each others' throats every year."

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