

Afghan Olive Farms Waiting for Water

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Once-thriving industry now in poor shape.

The eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar was once home to thousands of hectares of olive groves, but residents say water and electricity shortages, combined with land-grabs and war, have left the industry devastated.

State-run farms here once produced 8,000 tons of olives in a season, but in the decade since the fall of the Taliban, labourers have harvested a total of just 1,400 tons. Last year, the harvest was little over half a ton.

The olive industry grew up around the 1960s Nangarhar Canal, which was intended as a huge income generator for eastern Afghanistan. In its heyday, the 70-kilometres waterway provided the irrigation that enabled local producers to export their olives and fruit.

Today, however, officials say the canal system and the surrounding agriculture have been undermined by the dilapidated state of the Darunta hydroelectric dam, built in 1964 on the Kabul river.

The canal needs electricity to pump water along it, and its managers say they get far less than the amount they are supposed to get – 65 per cent of the power generated by the dam.

“Believe me, we hardly get five hours of electricity a week,” said Ziyarat-Gul Rahel, director of the Nangarhar Canal Project.

Mohammad Shoja, deputy director of Nangarhar’s energy department, said the reason the Darunta power station could not supply enough electricity to the canal was that there was not enough water dammed up to keep it fully operational. Only one of the dam’s three turbines was currently working, he said.

“We’re faced with a lack of water,” he said. “The problem is that the canal department is asking for both water and electricity at the same time – and we can’t satisfy both demands simultaneously.”

The United States Agency for International Development said last year that it was refurbishing and modernising the dam, where the turbine-driven generators were in poor condition and at risk of failing. It said it planned to finish the repair work by mid-2012.

But as Hezatullah, head of the Nangarhar Olive Factory, pointed out, the industry has declined not just because of water shortages, but also as a result of years of war and poor maintenance of farms.

There used to be 700,000 olive trees in the province, which borders on Pakistan, but three-quarters of them were destroyed by decades of war starting with the Soviet invasion of 1979, he said. The farms once employed 12,000 workers, but now ran on a skeleton staff of 800.

“There isn’t enough water to irrigate the olive trees, nor are there enough people to maintain the farms – not to mention a host of other problems,” Hezatullah said. “The canal was a significant undertaking for this eastern region, so the government should revive this now dilapidated project.”

One major obstacle to recovery is that state-owned farmlands have been seized and the trees chopped down.

Rahel said that of the 14,000 hectares once held by the Nangarhar Canal Project, only 1,100 hectares remained. “The rest has been taken illegally,” he said.

Local resident Naqib Ahmad recalled his father working on the olive farms, but he said that after the Taliban government was ousted in 2001, opportunists rushed in to grab government-owned land and cut down the olive trees.

As a result, Nangarhar residents find it harder and harder to buy locally-pressed olive oil.

Mohibullah said he went shopping for olive oil to treat pains in his grandfather’s feet, but was only able to find inferior Iranian and Pakistani products at the local markets. He went to the olive factory, but was turned away at the gates.

“The staff there are just standing around in the sun,” he complained. “The plant hasn’t functioned for several years; it’s an olive factory in name only.”

Faced with such customers, local shopkeeper Ziaurrahman Arab said that he sometimes lies and tells people the products they are buying are not foreign but Afghan.

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Topic: Drugs

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