

Kazaks to Dam Shrinking Aral

Author: [Alexander Zakharov](#)

Kazakstan is trying to rescue what it can of the sea, as regional water problems remain unresolved.

The Kazak government is pressing for faster progress on saving a section of the shrinking Aral Sea, as scientists predict the demise of what was once one of the world's largest inland water masses.

In the last 50 years the Aral, has dried up to a fraction of its original size. It has divided into two parts, the northern one inside Kazakstan and the bigger southern section largely in Uzbekistan. Soviet irrigation projects which drew off much of the water from the Aral's principal sources, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, are largely to blame for the crisis.

The shrinking water mass has inflicted major environmental problems on surrounding regions - caused by mineral salt contamination from the dried-up seabed - leaving local Kazak and Karakalpak people with a range of ailments and destroying their livelihoods.

Since January, engineers have been working on a dyke which they hope will contain the northern section, located in Kazakstan. Together with technology to regulate the flow of the Syr Darya, which runs through Kazak territory into the northern Aral, scientists think water levels could even begin rising, allowing the fishing industry to revive.

Earlier in August, a Kazak agriculture ministry team sent to check up on the construction project concluded that the Russian engineering contractor was well behind schedule.

"The project is moving slowly," deputy minister Akylbek Kurushbaev said on Kazak Television. "We had expected to have completed work to a value of two million [US] dollars by August, but only half of it has been done."

Representatives of the Russian firm said the Kazak government was to blame for delays in assigning funds to the project. A new schedule has now been agreed, and the dam is expected to be ready in three years.

This is not Kazakstan's first attempt to dam up its part of the sea - a previous wall constructed in the mid-Nineties was flattened by a storm in 1999. It has taken four years to restart the project, which has a price ticket of 86 million dollars, three quarters of which will be loaned by the World Bank.

The call to speed up construction is timely, as Moscow's Institute of Oceanology issued a report in July warning that the main, southern part of the Aral Sea - once one of the world's largest inland water masses - was disappearing even faster than previously predicted. Russian scientists found the sea level had fallen to 30.5 metres, 3.5 metres lower than they had expected, while salinity levels had increased.

"The eastern half of the south Aral could be gone in just 15 years," Peter Zavialov, who led the Russian survey, told the British magazine *New Scientist*.

Efforts like the Kazak dam depend on a bigger challenge for Central Asian governments - deciding how to share, and save, water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. Between them, the two rivers flow through all five states, each of which draws off water for irrigation or hydroelectricity with little regard for the effect

this will have on people living further downstream. The result is drought, with seasonal flooding. Several unusually dry years have exacerbated the problem.

To ensure water keeps flowing into the northern Aral, the Kazaks plan to build small dams to check the flow along their part of the Syr Darya, and use water for irrigation more efficiently. But further upstream, farmers in Uzbekistan's arid countryside are busy diverting as much water as they can in the summer months to grow cotton – a particularly thirsty crop – and to compensate for massive leakage from crumbling, wasteful irrigation canals.

The top of the river lies in Kyrgyzstan, where the incentive is to build up reservoir levels over the summer and let the water out when it gets cold and the country needs to generate hydroelectricity. "The problem is particularly bad during winter," complained Bulat Utkenov from the Kazak government-sponsored Save the Aral project. "Kyrgyzstan dumps more water than the river banks or dams can hold, because of its increased demand for electricity. As a result, some of the water is dumped on Uzbek territory, the rest freezes over, and no water reaches the northern Aral Sea."

Attempts at compromise have so far proved less than successful. An agreement between the Kyrgyz and Kazak governments foundered after the former said the latter had reneged on a deal to supply coal to Kyrgyzstan in return for controls over its hydroelectric industry.

"This [regulatory framework] is of paramount existence for the continued existence of the lesser [northern part of the] Aral," said Utkenov.

Unless Kazakhstan can reverse falling water levels in its part of the Aral, there will be little it can do to repair environmental damage across the greater region.

Local people are all too familiar with the winds which carry poisonous dust from the dead seabed over hundreds of kilometres, creating a salty white mist. Kazak scientists say constant exposure to the salts and pollutants in the air and soil reduces people's immunity and leads to widespread disease. Respiratory illnesses among children are increasing fast. The poverty caused by the economic consequences of the disappearing Aral makes people even more prone to sickness.

The city of Aralsk used to be the main Kazak port town, but has been left high and dry – 80 kilometres from the receding sea. The fishing industry closed up long ago and more recently the canning factory shut down.

"Almost all the women suffer from anaemia, and we have a very high rate of infant mortality," IWPR was told by Marat Sapargaliev, a doctor in Aralsk. "Most people can't afford to eat meat or fish. They survive on tea and bread, sometimes macaroni."

The sense of a lost, desperate town was echoed by local resident Nurlan Akhmetov, "In the past we used to hope someone would save us, as we were constantly promised that the sea would not be allowed to dry up completely. But now we can't imagine how we can go on, and we don't know what lies ahead of us."

Alexander Zakharov is the pseudonym for a journalist in Almaty.

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