

Kazakstan: Afghan Water Project Fears

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Kazaks say international plan to siphon off Aral Sea water to Afghanistan could be disastrous.

Scientists in Kazakstan are warning that a Japanese-American scheme to supply Afghanistan with water from the Aral Sea could cause an ecological catastrophe and damage the health of millions of Kazaks living in the region.

The inland sea is already in a poor state - its deterioration dating back to the Sixties, when the Soviet government diverted the rivers flowing into the sea for agricultural purposes.

By siphoning off vast quantities of water from the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers to irrigate cotton and watermelon fields and vineyards in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, they partially dried up the sea, which has now effectively split into two - the Malyi (small) Aral and Bolshoi (big) Aral. By the early Eighties there was already talk of the Aral Sea's "death".

The effects on the health of about 3 million people living in the region were soon apparent. A fresh water shortage and the presence of defoliants and acidic chemicals from cotton production in the remaining supply were held responsible for widespread kidney and liver disease and an alarming death rate among children.

Japanese and American scientists launched their proposal in Tokyo on January 21 at an international aid conference on Afghanistan. They suggested splitting the Aral Sea into three lakes, draining off the excess water into Afghanistan via the Amudarya river.

The Kazak delegation was aghast, warning that the consequences for the local population would dwarf the September 11 attacks on the US, in which 3,000 perished.

"It's not that we don't want to help Afghanistan," said Sabit Almasov, an ecologist. "But this undertaking would carry the risk of an enormous ecological catastrophe for Kazakstan, a catastrophe that couldn't even be compared with September 11. The whole of Central Asia could suffer, and then the whole world."

Apart from decrying the potential cost of the plan, the Kazak scientists pointed to the danger of a complete breakdown in the water system, which is already corroded.

Draining the sea, they say, would leave an enormous saline deposit. "Wind could carry this fine salt over a distance of over 100,000 km and pose a serious health hazard," Gennady Zaretsky, another ecologist, said.

Igor Malekovsky, deputy director of the Kazak Scientific Research Institute of Geography, KSRIG, delivered a yet harsher verdict, warning of a worldwide ecological catastrophe. "This water basin is capable of causing major damage to the climactic condition of the planet," he said.

The US-Japanese plan was particularly unwelcome as Kazakstan had already drawn up its own scheme for the Aral Sea, based on raising the level of the Malyi Aral with water from the Syrdarya river, and maintaining the river flow into the Bolshoi Aral. Lack of money means the project has got nowhere,

however.

The government has yet to issue an official reaction the US-Japanese plan. While the provision of water to Afghanistan would obviously boost the country's international image and please the US, the main sponsor of the new government in Kabul, the move would be highly unpopular at home.

The public is already sensitive to the health risk posed by the current situation. "Even now, when only a part of the water basin has been drained, Aral salt can be found on the Tian Shiang mountains and every second inhabitant of the surrounding Priaral region suffers from lung complaints, cancer and anaemia," commented the Kazak weekly Novoye Pokolenie (New Generation).

The head of the Astana delegation to Tokyo, Kairat Abuseitov, suggested his country should provide Afghanistan grain, foodstuffs and construction materials, instead of water. Under a deal with the World Food Programme, Kazakstan has already agreed to send more than 70,000 tons of wheat.

Given public hostility to the US-Japanese scheme, the authorities are unlikely to give it serious consideration.

"Why should the Japanese and Americans resolve such issues on our behalf?" asked Sergei Likhachov, an Almaty businessman. "We are the ones who will suffer. The Americans wouldn't like it if we suggested the money they intend to use to rebuild the World Trade Centre went to Afghanistan."

Aralsk resident Sansyzbek Kairatbekov said, "It's not our problem. We know Afghanistan is having a hard time, but we do not want to die in order to help them." Another local, Mira Akisheva, said, "You won't find one healthy person in this town. If the sea dries out entirely, we'll either have to move or all die."

Yevgeny Grinberg, a student in Almaty, probably summed up the way most Kazaks feel about the proposal coming out of Tokyo, "If the Japanese are so desperate to help Afghanistan, let them drain the Japanese Sea."

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