

## **New Uzbek Water Crisis**

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Tashkent blames farmers for exacerbating serious water shortages

Uzbekistan is facing a new water crisis, as a result of drought, rapid population growth and the shrinking of the Aral Sea.

But despite its problems, Tashkent curiously refuses to negotiate with its neighbours, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, over sharing water resources.

One of the worst hit areas of Uzbekistan is Karakalpakstan in the northwest. As a consequence of severe drought, the region received only 42 per cent of its average annual supply of water last year.

This has devastated agriculture, the main sector of the local economy. Many rice and cotton plantations are said to have perished. Pastures are so withered that cattle have had to be slaughtered.

Last year drought devastated around 300,000 hectares of crops in the region, directly affecting the livelihood of about 50,000 families. People were forced to drink poor quality water, which resulted in a rise in diseases such as hepatitis and tuberculosis.

Vadim Antonov of the ministry of agriculture and water resources lays the blame on population growth which has increased four-fold to 25 million over the last hundred years, according to official statistics.

The population is currently growing by about 500,000 a year, requiring enormous amounts of land to be turned over to agriculture, exhausting water supplies and draining the Aral Sea.

Within 10 years, says Antonov, Uzbekistan won't have the water resources to meet its needs

Some experts have suggested exploiting large reserves of fresh underground water in the northeast of the southern Aral Sea area. They propose building a plant to bottle the supply to provide the population with drinking water.

But in the long term, it seems, the only solution will be to use supplies from outside the country. One suggestion is to revive a plan to divert Siberian rivers to Central Asia. The project was dropped several years ago after critical press reports.

"Russia is prepared to revive the plan," said Antonov. "Because if we use their water, we can in turn supply people in Siberia and the Urals with fruit and vegetables, which are in short supply. Some people have never seen grapes, let alone watermelons."

The project would involve the construction of a canal costing around US\$16 billion, but none of the countries in the region have this sort of money.

The cost could explain why high-ranking Uzbek officials prefer to ignore the water problem altogether.

International organizations - the World Bank in particular - are reluctant to back such schemes too. A grant for preliminary analysis was refused.

They say that Uzbekistan's problem has less to do with shortages than mismanagement of existing water resources, and that distribution systems must be reformed first.

According to Antonov, 40 per cent of irrigation water could be re-used. The problem with this is that it would contain dissolved ground salts, mineral fertilizers and poisonous chemicals.

To install a modern irrigation system - such as Israel's - would cost around \$10 million, which Tashkent could not afford in the current economic climate.

Antonov believes the Tokhogul reservoir in Kyrgyzstan is Uzbekistan's best hope. He says all the countries in the region could strike an agreement to share the valuable resource.

The reservoir was built 26 years ago explicitly to support irrigation. In Soviet times, the water was shared between the republics. But several years ago, Kyrgyzstan began using the water for energy, depriving Uzbekistan. An agricultural catastrophe there was only avoided because land had been relatively well irrigated over the preceding decade.

Kyrgyzstan's need for electricity is understandable. But its monopolisation of this scarce resource angers Uzbeks. "Water is like air," said Antonov. "It cannot have an owner."

But Tashkent isn't entirely blameless. It could have offered Kyrgyzstan electricity and natural gas in exchange for water. But the country's leaders are unwilling to do so: all Antonov's proposals on the matter have been ignored.

Instead, the government is blaming farmers for not using water economically.

In an article in the newspaper Pravda Vostoka, Bioecology specialist Amin Bakhiyev, citing regional figures in Karalpakstan, said 40 per cent of water is lost in the irrigation system.

The authorities have warned they will not help farmers harvest their crops if they continue to fritter away the country's water resources.

But such punitive measures are unfair. This has less to do with bad farming practices than severe climatic demographic problems.

Until politicians acknowledge the seriousness of the water shortages, the problem is only likely to get worse.

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