

## **Thirsty Town Taps Into Iran**

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Drought-stricken border region looks around for vital water supplies.

Drought has dried up the border town of Zaranj in south-west Afghanistan, to the point where the people who remain are dependent on costly water from Iran to survive.

If they can't afford that, they have to wash in and even drink the local, salty water. The local authorities say they are unable to do more to provide clean supplies.

Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz province, has suffered several years of drought as water levels have sunk in the Helmand river which flows through Nimroz, and wells have dried up. This desert region of Afghanistan saw little benefit from the rain and snow that ended the drought in the rest of the country earlier this year.

The problem has been compounded by collapsing water supply systems, which fell into disrepair under Taliban rule in the mid- to late Nineties.

Figures from the World Health Organisation, WHO, indicate that Zaranj's population plummeted from 100,000 in 1997 to just 60,000 last year. About three hours' drive from Zaranj, the city of Ghor Ghor is nearly a ghost town, with half its population having trickled away over the past year and a half.

The Kabul office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees registered 5,000 displaced people from Nimroz arriving in other provinces last year, and says the drought-stricken south accounts for most of the country's internal refugees.

Zaranj's remaining population have to buy water brought in by tankers from Iran, if they can afford it. It costs 100 Iranian tomans, about 12 US cents, for 20 litres and people use it for washing and cooking as well as drinking. Local officials told IWPR that the water is impure from being transported in tanks, and often makes people ill.

"We are educated, and know that the water should be boiled," said Gul Makai, who works in the women's affairs department of the local government. "But people who do not know this, and are illiterate, suffer from various diseases - skin conditions, mouth infections, diarrhoea and other diseases that we can't even imagine."

Those too poor to buy the imported water have to use local wells. But Zaranj lies below sea level and the water from these wells, even the newer ones, is salty. "People drink it because they need to drink," said Dr Abdu Shakoor of the emergency department at Zaranj's hospital. He said 60 per cent of his patients are people made ill by drinking the local water.

The water is so saline that it is no good for washing. "The city water can't even be used to wash clothes," said Habiba, a housewife in Zaranj. "When we use the water to wash ourselves, it doesn't clean our skin, and it dries it, so we use lotion." Her young daughter's complexion was as dry as baked earth.

Dr Abdu Shakoor said that pleas for help from the United Nations and the Afghan government have not delivered results.

In 1997, WHO completed work on a new water treatment plant, a distribution system and a pump house to bring water from the Helmand river to Zaranj - but the effect of this was lost when the river then dried up.

More recently, the municipal authorities have funded a 25-kilometre pipeline from Iran, which will bring in drinking water once it comes into use in a month or so. But municipal administrator Haji Mohammed Yaqoub warned that this would still cover only 40 to 50 per cent of the city's needs. And local officials have not yet decided how much residents will be charged for the clean water.

Efforts have also been made at provincial level. The authorities have dug some wells in village areas. But they have failed to get officials in neighbouring Helmand province to agree to a pipeline bringing water from the Lashkari river, which currently runs into the sand before reaching Nimroz.

The provincial governor, Haji Abdul Karim Barahawi, told IWPR that the Nimroz authorities have done as much as they can. He has pleaded with the government in Kabul, including President Hamed Karzai, to allocate some help, but so far with no result.

Besides trying to find new sources of water, officials have also attempted to make the water currently imported from Iran more affordable. Yaqoub said the municipality has attempted to impose a price cap of about 50 toman, or 6 cents, per 20 litres on the imported supplies. But they have no way to enforce this limit - and the water sellers ignore it, arguing that they cannot make a profit at that price.

One seller, Zar Gul, told IWPR, "Selling water at 50 toman is a total loss for us. We can't get enough money to cover the cost of fuel. Our labour and the wear to the vehicles costs more than that."

Some Zaranj residents believe the only long-term solution is to press ahead with a plan to build a dam at Kamal Khan on the upper reaches of the Helmand river. But a dispute with Iran, whose southeastern city of Zabol depends on the river, has stalled the project for years.

In the meantime, Zaranj residents have one incentive to stay - the thriving cross-border business with Iran, which involves smuggling as well as legal trading.

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