

Water Crisis Hits Baghdad

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Some resort to digging wells as the capital's taps run dry.

Muhammad Sa'ad wiped the sweat off his forehead after a hot day spent filling pots and plastic containers with water. It took him so long because there was barely a trickle from his kitchen tap.

For three weeks in a row, the city has suffered severe power shortages, now up to 23 hours a day, causing a water crisis in many areas.

Sa'ad, who lives in the al-I'lam neighbourhood, blames the government for the lack of running water, saying that it hasn't done enough to deal with the problem.

Some residents draw water from their taps using electric pumps powered by private generators, an illegal practice but one used by many households. But the continuing fuel shortage means that even this option is frequently ruled out.

Without power, fuel and water, Sa'ad is afraid the swiftly approaching summer will be unbearable.

"In addition to the continuous bombings and killings, the hot summer this year will complete the tragedy we live in," he said.

Already ailments such as diarrhea have started to spread in heavily populated areas, mainly in Umm al-Ma'alif south of Baghdad.

People who need water purchase it from tankers that come to certain neighbourhoods - few can afford to buy bottled supplies, as the economic situation is so bad.

Baghdad seems to be caught in a vicious circle: the governorate of Baghdad needs electricity and fuel to operate water pumping stations but does not receive enough of either to keep them running.

Because of the lack of power, more and more people resort to fuel-operated privately owned generators - which further increases the fuel shortage. Without electricity, people cannot operate their air conditioning and suffer even more from the heat and the lack of water.

Sabir al-Isawi, the governor of Baghdad, said the governorate is now trying to provide emergency power supplies to keep water-pumping stations operating continuously. But this is conditional on the oil ministry coming up with enough fuel.

The governor said he has tried to put pressure on the oil ministry through the Council of Ministers to solve the crisis - but the ministry says a solution is not in its hand.

According to Asim Jihad, the oil ministry's official spokesperson, the ministry has not been able to provide enough fuel for Baghdad citizens and services due to security measures put in place to protect the bridges in and around Baghdad.

Tayseer al-Mashhadani, a member of the national assembly's services and works committee, confirmed that a number of bridges have been sabotaged - some completely destroyed.

The new security measures have caused long queues of fuel tankers near the bridges. They have to stop and often wait for hours to be inspected before they can cross.

Karim Hattab, another oil ministry official, said the supply problems were exacerbated when insurgents blew up the pipeline that transfers fuel to Baghdad on May 17.

"This deprived the capital of huge amounts of fuel," said Hattab. "Both ministries of defense and interior refused to provide protection for us to fix the pipe."

The same pipeline had suffered a number of acts of sabotage this year. Five engineers were killed in March while on a maintenance mission.

Jihad also pointed out that the use of private generators due to the frequent power cuts has increased the demand for fuel, so much so that it has put pressure on the limited capacities of Iraq refineries.

As a result of pipeline sabotage and security restrictions, Baghdad receives three quarters of the four million litres of fuel it needs every day, according to al-Hattab.

Meanwhile, Baghdadis are forced to find their own water supply. Those who can afford it try to dig wells in their backyard, an expensive operation which also seriously affects the water table.

Well drilling costs between 300,000 to 500,000 Iraqi dinars (236 to 393 US dollars) - an amount that many families cannot afford. The price rises depending on how deep they have to dig to hit water and on the soil quality.

Even if a family can afford the luxury of a private well, it's not even usable for laundry because it is mixed with sewage that has seeped into the groundwater from corroded pipes or has a very high salinity.

Mustafa al-Ani, a university political sciences student from the al-Adl neighborhood, west of Baghdad, does not believe the water shortages are due to lack of power, but the consequence of an inefficient government.

Collecting water has become part of a daily routine for Baghdadi families, including al-Ani's. Each member of his family, he says, fill pots and plastic bottles on a rota system, so there's always some water to hand when the supply is cut. But even this does not provide enough for his family.

In desperation, some local residents sever the main water pipe in their neighborhood and attach an electric pump to get more water, causing disputes among families.

Al-Ani says he can only take showers every two or three days, and feels dirty and sweaty all the time.

The power cuts are so severe that they have even reached the formerly privileged Green Zone where the government and many foreign organisations are located. Tayseer al-Mashhadani, from the national assembly's services and work committee, reported that the water supply to this fortified stronghold shuts down for several hours every day.

The situation doesn't look as though it will improve anytime soon. For three days in May, power in the capital was completely off after insurgents attacked electricity pylons.

Aziz Sultan, a spokesman for the electricity ministry, said 15 pylons have been sabotaged, and a number that had been previously fixed by technicians have suffered new attacks.

The water crisis has been compounded by the fact that chlorine necessary for purification is in short supply.

Insurgents have recently employed chlorine bombs in residential areas and markets in al-Bayya south of Baghdad and in al-Taji north of the capital

Dozens of people have been killed, prompting security forces to impose tight controls on chlorine factories and trucks that transport the chemical from neighbouring countries to Iraq.

Shakir Sa'ed, who imports chlorine for a number of Iraqi government departments, says his trucks are stopped at the border because guards fear they might fall into the hands of insurgents.

"We - as businessmen - don't know what to do," complained Sa'ed. "The only solution is to leave the country."

Basim al-Shara is an IWPR reporter in Baghdad.

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