

Water Crisis Hits Kabul

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Kabulis are exhausted by the daily search for water.

International organisations are struggling to stem a local water crisis resulting from drought and decades of war.

Three out of the city's four water sources have dried up, while the main regional supplier, the Logar River plant, has been out of operation since being severely damaged during fighting in the early Nineties.

Drought has lowered the water table to such an extent that residents are forced to dig ever-deeper wells. These in turn prevent shallower springs from refilling – leaving many with no choice but to carry water huge distances from public fountains.

At the same time, water is also being lost through cracked and broken pipes, a legacy of the country's years of war and neglect.

Every person in the capital needs around ten litres of water every day, and the situation can only get worse as tens of thousands of returning refugees flood into the city, putting further strain on resources.

Afghanistan's transitional administration is now facing a race against time to secure enough overseas aid to patch up its water supply infrastructure before the bitter winter sets in.

The interim administration has attracted more than 10 million euro in aid from KfW, a leading German bank, for urgent repairs to the system.

"The priorities have been specified and there are no technical or financial difficulties, so it is only a matter of time before we can distribute water to all the houses of Kabul," Najibullah Patan of Kabul's sanitation department said optimistically.

The Logar plant, which has ten deep wells that could potentially provide Kabul with 40 percent of its water supply, is next on the list of priorities. Germany has been asked to provide strong pumps for the complex.

At the same time, Japanese organisations are funding efforts to find new water sources. And several NGOs are also working around the clock to help the residents of the capital, but they are finding the going hard.

Care International's Dad Mohammad Baheer told IWPR, "Chahel Satoon, Bagh Bala and De Dana regions have huge problems because there are deep wells in these regions which have run out of water at the moment.

"The diesel machines that were installed by aid organisations have since broken down and have not yet been repaired, and the problems are exacerbated by the intermittent electricity supply.

“Areas such as Qalae Wazir, Naw Abad, Khushal Khan and Do Rahee of Kargha are among the worst-hit, as the land is very rocky, which makes it especially difficult to dig wells. ISAF (the international stabilisation force) and the ministry of urban development are studying these areas and are soon to make a decision on how best to tackle the problems.”

Meanwhile, Kabul’s residents are worn out by long hours carrying heavy pails of water across the city, and are demanding the government act swiftly before the winter sets in.

Ghulam Haider, a resident of Chahar Qala region of Kabul, finds the daily search for water exhausting. “When I go home at night I am very tired, but I still have to bring water on my bicycle from a mosque, which is very far from our house,” he said.

Next to a roadside teashop in Chindawal, people jostle for position each day to get access to hand-operated water pumps. Ferishta, a small child, waits patiently in a disorderly queue. She told IWPR that she has to do this three or four times a day, as water from the family well is unfit to drink.

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