Water Problems in Tajikistan

Author: IWPR staff
Flooding aggravates problems caused by Tajikistan’s substandard water treatment facilities.

An upsurge in waterborne infections in southern Tajikistan over the last couple of weeks following recent flooding comes as a stark reminder of the decrepit state of the country’s water supply system.

With some 65 per cent of all Central Asia’s supplies originating in its mountainous landscape, Tajikistan has never been short of water. But the facilities available for actually treating and distributing this valuable resource within Tajikistan are pitiful.

The recent floods have merely exacerbated enduring problems suffered by the population as a result of unclean drinking water.

Government officials estimate that the flooding of the Panj river, which forms the border with Afghanistan, in June and July this year caused some 50 million US dollars’ worth of damage in the southern Hamadoni and Farkhor districts.

Flooding is not uncommon in the summer months, when rising temperatures cause ice and snow to melt in the high mountains.

But the recent torrent proved particularly destructive, demolishing 30 kilometres of dykes, eight bridges and 400 houses. It also wiped out tens of thousands of kilometres of phone and power lines, as well as thousands of hectares of cotton and wheat crops, gardens and orchards.

One person is known to have drowned and some 8,000 residents had to be evacuated from the area.

With canals washed away, there has been a sharp increase in cases of waterborne diseases in the Kurgan-Tube area of the southern Hatlon region. A further two people have already died there as a result of acute intestinal illnesses.

The deputy head of the regional health department Sodik Doliev assured IWPR that these kinds of intestinal diseases, which tend to fluctuate seasonally, are under control.

But the outbreak in the south is only part of a much longer-term problem caused by unclean water supplies throughout the country.

Hikmatullo Shahtobov, head doctor at the children’s hospital in the capital Dushanbe, reports that 40 children were admitted at the end of last month with acute food poisoning, diarrhoea and dehydration.

And local doctors are currently doing the rounds of apartment blocks in Dushanbe warning residents about the dangers of typhoid, although health officials dealing with this disease have told IWPR that the threat is currently less serious than it has been in the past.
The emergencies ministry has also recently begun distributing medication to hospitals in the Hissar Valley, west of Dushanbe, in an effort to prevent an epidemic of intestinal illnesses caused by waterborne bacteria.

And, despite efforts by the health ministry to counter them, rumours persist that the authorities are grossly understating the extent of a cholera outbreak in the south east of the country.

The high frequency of such waterborne illnesses in Tajikistan ultimately traces back to the country’s decaying water supply system.

As soon as the annual rains start in the country, in the spring and autumn, a person turning on a tap is often rewarded with a coffee-brown liquid replete with sand, worms and bugs. Such water is unusable not just for drinking and cooking with, but even for washing one’s hands.

There is some hope of improvements in the future. The United Nations declared 2005 to 2015 the International Decade for Action: Water for Life. The title was meant in part to underline the need to provide clean drinking water across the globe.

President Imomali Rahmonov has said that 20 million dollars have been set aside to refurbish the water supply system in Dushanbe and that the population of that city, at least, ought to have access to clean drinking water by 2007.

In late July, the World Bank allocated an additional 13 million dollars in non-repayable funding to go towards an overhaul of the water system in Dushanbe and in in the north of the country.

But Petra Zeidler, a representative of the international MVV/Hydroplan consortium that has a tender to revamp Dushanbe’s water supply, says much more money is needed if the job is to be done properly. “To completely reconstruct the Dushanbe water supply system would cost around 150 million dollars,” Zeidler told IWPR.

The state enterprise in charge of water distribution in Dushanbe also appears to be sliding into financial ruin.

In mid-2007, the company is due to start paying back a previous loan from the World Bank. And observers warn that even if all customers pay their water bills on time, the revenue will still only be enough to cover around 30 per cent of the normal operating costs of the city’s water system.

One option is for the enterprise to raise its rates, but with a million dollars already outstanding in unpaid water bills at the start of last month, it remains an open question whether higher prices would actually increase revenue or just ratchet up this consumer debt.

Another possible solution that has been considered by the company is to install water meters and carry out random checks to prevent wastage of water, particularly by people tending their gardens. But this route has the disadvantage that it would require extra resources.

In the meantime, locals say problems caused by waterborne infections are only likely to be made worse by the introduction on August 1 of a new fee system for medical treatment in Tajik hospitals. While a formal list of prices has not yet been made available, patients report that a day’s treatment in hospital now costs
around 30 dollars.

“The number of cases of intestinal illnesses with a fatal outcome will grow every day as a result,” Shamsia Islamova, a resident of the Hissar district, told IWPR. “People in most districts are poor and can’t pay this kind of money for treatment. All we can do is trust in God.”

**Location:** Tajikistan  
Afghanistan

**Source URL:** https://iwpr.net/global-voices/water-problems-tajikistan