

Water scarcity hampers development

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MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE problem of water shortage, compounded by pollution, is causing indisputable harm in most poor countries of Asia and Africa. The population in poor countries like Bangladesh is growing so fast that improvements on water supply have failed to keep pace. Worldwide, two billion people still have no access to clean water, and water contaminated by sewage is estimated to kill 3.4 million, including two million children, every year.

Water experts have sounded an alarm that within the next 25 years, half of the world's population could have trouble in finding enough fresh water for drinking and irrigation. Currently, as reports reveal, at least 80 countries, representing 40 percent of the world's population, are subject to severe water shortages. Conditions may get worse as population grows and global warming disrupts rainfall patterns.

People in West Asian countries now use 54 per cent of the available fresh water, and additional demand will further jeopardise the ecosystem. Added to this is the problem of pollution caused by fertilisers, pesticides, silts, sewage and other toxic effluents that have killed lakes and poisoned rivers.

The crisis did not end there. Half of the world's wetlands have been drowned through conversion, diversion and fragmentation of the system, resulting in destruction of habitat. Polluted water,

which provides a breeding ground for parasites, amoebas, and bacteria, damages the health of 1.2 billion people a year. Water borne diseases are responsible for 80 percent of illnesses and deaths in the developing world, killing a child every eight seconds.

The water crisis, it is now believed, has been caused by the dam building mentality of the developed nations. The Hoover Dam, built over the Colorado river to support Los Angeles, inaugurated an age of dam building. The dam building mentality, however, has pretty much expired in the developed world, but is still prevalent throughout much of the rest of the world. In China, which is erecting the Three Gorges Dam, the biggest hydro-electric project in history and at \$25 billion the most expensive, one sees outright resentment against rivers running free.

Almost everyone appreciates how water projects have altered the course of civilisation in ways we call (perhaps foolishly) benign. Dams and reservoirs permit unimaginable numbers of people to inhabit forbiddingly arid regions as well as flood plains, where cities would be washed away without upstream protection.

Despite the fact that dams provide more clean energy than any other conventional source, including nuclear reactors, and reservoirs behind the dam supply irrigation water to farmlands, they have well-publicised vices. They are notorious for causing great environmen-

tal change and force massive human resettlement, mostly of people who live where the lake is due to appear.

Dams, with all their material blessings, are responsible for some of the worst environmental tragedies in history. The Three Gorges Dam is now under construction upriver in Sinchuan province, but turning the upper Yangtze into the world's greatest reservoirs won't stop flooding, inundation and pollution of water areas and vast farmlands in the lower riparian countries, India and ultimately Bangladesh.

The construction of the Farakka Barrage in West Bengal in India did not yield the anticipated benefit even for India, let alone the unimaginable havoc it has wrought on Bangladesh through the drying up of rivers, creating a severe water shortage. West Bengal bears the brunt of the folly and fancy of the central government. The huge amount of silt deposited in the upstream has reduced the depth and slope of the Ganges, causing in its wake erosion and change of course of the river.

The Ganges carries 80 crore ton of silt every year. In just three decades after the commissioning of the Farakka Barrage, because of the obstruction caused, the Ganges is now laden with a huge amount of silt, reducing the depth of the river. We are yet to see what effect the Tipaimukh dam, to be constructed in Manipur state in India, has on both India and Bangladesh.

Reports circulated by UNDE, FAO, WHO and World Bank indicate that the world's supply of clean fresh water, already threatened by construction of dams and growing levels of pollution, is going to be so scarce in some areas that, if the current trend continues, two-thirds of humanity will suffer moderate to severe water stress within 30 years.



The earth is crying out for water.

The report warns that the situation imperils not only human health and development on a large scale, but also the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems on which much of Earth's life depends. There is clear and convincing evidence, the report says, that the world faces a worsening series of local and regional water quantity and quality problems, largely as a result of poor water allocation, wasteful use of water resource and lack of management resources.

"The glaring lack of attention to water issues seems puzzling, and may be termed as the most critical failure of the 20th century and a major challenge for the 21st," contends Peter Gleick, one of the world's leading experts on fresh water resources. Gleick further says that the economic costs are not that high compared to the costs of failing to meet those needs. There is hardly any second opinion about the fact that we are now facing a

world water gap and, because of our apathy, it is getting worse with each passing day.

With about 250 rivers that once dotted the country, Bangladesh is now identified as a water-scarce country. The consequences of failing to bridge the gap will be higher food prices and expensive food imports. Hunger and thirst, experts say, are linked to political instability and low rates of economic growth.

That underscores the fact that there must be political will and national consensus in solving the key issues affecting people's lives. With the food and disaster management ministry receiving the highest allocation in the current budget, it would be wise for the government to invest a sizable amount for creating water reservoirs, excavating silted tanks and canals, and maintaining flow of rivers by proper dredging, as the prime minister has asserted on different occasions in the

past six months.

These measures will work as steps towards disaster preparedness, augment food production and meet the crisis of drinking water. With underground water table being depleted abnormally because of excessive extraction, we have to conserve surface water to allow aquifers to be recharged.

Moreover, as much of the world becomes urbanised, its water crisis will deepen. Dhaka, a mega city of 12.5 million people, has to rely mostly (about 87 percent) on ground water, but aquifers take decades to recharge while the population growth in the city is exponential. Human activity is playing an ever greater role in creating water scarcity and "water stress" -- defined as the indication that there is not enough good quality water to meet human needs.

Burning fossil fuels indiscriminately to power industrial growth, deforestation and dam-building are some of the ill-thought out activities the developed countries have been carrying on to meet their insatiable needs. In consequence, global warming fueled by excessive carbon emission has resulted in a drought like situation, creating water scarcity in many parts of the world including Bangladesh.

The fact is that, population wise and area wise, in respect of water resources Bangladesh is not in a very uncomfortable position. But its people are having an increasingly difficult time managing, allocating and protecting the water that exists. And the present government, that has made firm pledges to usher in changes, must meet the challenge squarely.

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Marines on a new mission

The Taliban, who took control of Afghanistan in 1996 and were ousted from power following a US-led invasion in 2001, have made a violent comeback, wreaking havoc in much of the country's south and east, forcing the United States to pour in the new troops.

NEWS DESK (The Nation, PAKISTAN)

THOUSANDS of US Marines and hundreds of Afghan troops poured into Taliban-infested villages of southern Afghanistan with armour and helicopters Thursday in the first major operation under President Barack Obama's strategy to stabilise the country.

The offensive was launched shortly after 1am Thursday (local time) in Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold and the world's largest opium poppy producing area. The goal is to clear insurgents from the hotly contested region before the nation's August 20 presidential election.

Officials described the operation, dubbed Khanjar, or "Strike of the Sword," as the largest and fastest-moving of the war's new phase and the biggest Marine offensive since the one in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004. It involves nearly 4,000 newly

arrived Marines and 650 Afghan forces. British forces last week led similar, but smaller, missions to clear out insurgents in Helmand and neighbouring Kandahar provinces.

"Where we go we will stay, and where we stay, we will hold, build and work toward transition of all security responsibilities to Afghan forces," Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson said in a statement.

Transport helicopters carried hundreds of Marines into the village of Nawa, some 30km south of the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, in a region where no US or other Nato troops have operated in large numbers. Daybreak brought the sporadic crackle of gunfire, but no heavy fighting immediately broke out.

Medical helicopters circled overhead and landed, indicating possible early casualties among the Marines. A roadside bomb early in the mission wounded

one Marine, but he was able to continue, spokesman Capt. Bill Pelletier said.

Southern Afghanistan is a Taliban stronghold, but also a region where Afghan President Hamid Karzai is seeking votes from fellow Pashtun tribesmen. The Pentagon is deploying 21,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in time for the elections and expects the total number of US forces there to reach 68,000 by year's end. That is double the number of troops in Afghanistan in 2008, but still

half of much as are now in Iraq.

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Pelletier said that troops in Thursday's operation were sent in by a mixture of aircraft and ground transport under the cover of darkness.



Allowing Afghans to defend themselves.

The operation aims to show "the Afghan people that when we come in we are going to stay long enough to set up their own institutions," Pelletier said. Once on the ground, the troops will meet with local leaders, hear their needs, and act on them, Pelletier said.

"We do not want people of Helmand province to see us as an enemy, we want to protect them from the enemy," Pelletier said. Thousands of British forces, fighting under Nato command, have been in Helmand since 2006 with broadly the same strategy, but security has deteriorated. They have met with stronger resistance than initially expected against Taliban fighters bankrolled by the vast opium and heroin trade.

Reversing the insurgency's momentum has been a key component of the new US strategy, and thousands of additional troops allow commanders to push and stay into areas where international and Afghan troops had no permanent presence before.

"We are kind of forging new ground here. We are going to a place nobody has been before," said Capt. Drew Schoenmaker, 31, from Greene, New York, who commands Bravo Company of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. While Marine troops were the bulk of the force, recently arrived US army helicopters were

also taking part in the operation.

In March, Obama unveiled his strategy for Afghanistan, seeking to defeat al-Qaida terrorists there and in Pakistan with a bigger force and a new commander. Taliban and other extremists, including those allied with al-Qaida, routinely cross the two nations' border in Afghanistan's remote south. The governor of Helmand province predicted the operation would be "very effective."

"The security forces will build bases to provide security for the local people so that they can carry out every activity with this favourable background, and take their lives forward in peace," Gov. Gulab Mangal said in a Pentagon news release.

Obama aims to boost the Afghan army from 80,000 to 134,000 troops by 2011 -- and greatly increase training by US troops accompanying them -- so the Afghan military can take control of the war. The White House also is pushing forces to set clear goals for a war gone awry, provide more resources and make a better case for international support. There is no timetable for withdrawal, and the White House has not estimated how many billions of dollars its plan will cost.

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Army is the key

The Manmohan Singh-Gilani meeting in Egypt, or the meeting of foreign secretaries, would be successful only to the extent Gen. Parvez Kayani is willing to go. Can he look at Pakistan's relations with India without bringing in the past? Normalcy between the two countries depends on that.

KULDIP NAYAR

WHEN New Delhi and Islamabad haven't been able to agree upon the place of meeting for foreign secretaries, it doesn't augur well for the future. It's difficult to imagine anything tangible coming out of their talks. Both sides had to fall back on the venue of the non-aligned summit in Egypt and accept the dates of the meeting because that was the only recourse left.

The two opposite viewpoints were voiced even in mid-June, when Pakistan High Commissioner Shahid Malik called on Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon to fix the date and place for a meeting between the two foreign secretaries. The 30-minute-long discussion failed to produce anything concrete. Malik reportedly gave the impression that Pakistan would not be interested in the talks if they were to discuss

terrorism alone.

India's stand is that the meetings of foreign secretaries should be devoted only to terrorism, particularly the Mumbai carnage, which people operating from Pakistan planned and executed from beginning to end. On the other hand, Pakistan would like the foreign secretaries to discuss "all issues," including the process of composite dialogue. Islamabad is said to be keen on taking up the Kashmir issue, which is part of the composite dialogue.

No doubt, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Asif Zardari must have discussed at Yekaterinburg in Russia the respective stands and many more things in the one-to-one talks. They are the ones who instructed the two foreign secretaries to meet before the summit in Egypt. Their talks would be of little use because one should have time to work on the points raised by the other. The opportunity given to Indian Prime

Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan Prime Minister Yousaf Reza Gilani at the summit meeting would go waste if they had nothing before them except the deadlock to discuss.

Unfortunately, Gilani will pick up the thread from where Zardari had left it off. He has said that the core issue is Kashmir. One does not see how the point of terrorists' attack on Mumbai can be stretched to a solution of Kashmir, however important the latter is.

Gilani also raised the Kashmir issue on the day Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, the Lashkar-e-Toiba chief, was set free by Lahore High Court. Gilani's statement is like a BJP leader saying on the day of Babri Masjid's destruction that Kashmir is an integral part of India.

That the Kashmir issue should be resolved needs no repetition. This has beleaguered the two nations for decades and has led to two and a half wars. New Delhi realises more than Islamabad that normalcy is not even thinkable without having Kashmir out of the way. But that requires a proper atmosphere in India, and it cannot be created without bringing the perpetrators of the Mumbai attack to justice.

Islamabad should also realise that it cannot win Kashmir at a conference table when it lost it at the battlefield.

Pakistan has to create confidence in India that it is willing to take into account the thinking in New Delhi, which feels that it has been wronged again and again.

Coming to Kashmir, the main objection of India is to the division of the state on the basis of religion. This objection may not fit into the two-nation theory, the principle on which Pakistan was constituted. But then, its founder Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah himself reinterpreted the theory after partition and made the Pakistanis and the Indians as two nations on the basis of territory, not religion.

Another difficulty New Delhi faces is that the boundaries of Kashmir cannot be redrawn. The Indian parliament, the ultimate authority, will not agree to a constitutional amendment that the alteration will entail. What can come in handy is General Parvez Musharraf's reported formula, which made the borders redundant and divided the state territorially. Retired officials from India and Pakistan, who constitute the back channel, have gone on record as saying that they had "covered 80% of the journey" on way to Kashmir's solution.

If this is true -- I know that both sides were optimistic at one point of time -- there is every chance of the formula

being retrieved and pursued. At some stage, the people of Jammu and Kashmir should be associated because there can be no solution without their concurrence. Yet, it is a pity that some leaders in the valley are bent upon stoking parochial fires, trying to give an Islamic edge to the Kashmiri, a pluralistic concept, that the people follow.

In fact, India is worried over the brutalisation of its society. Happenings in Kashmir have contributed towards it the most. The nation is opposed to the Unlawful Activities (Preventive) Act, which drastically changes procedures for trying those who are accused of terrorism.

The common man has suffered from the untrammelled powers in the hands of the police. The Armed Forces Act has given extraordinary powers to the security forces in the Northeast and Kashmir. Democracy loses its content if the laws of an authoritarian state become part of governance.

Yet, when cross-border terrorism becomes a menace fear takes over the society. It pawns its liberty to those who assure it security or a semblance of it. Kashmir has dulled the sensitivity of even the liberals. The support to Pakistan by India against the Taliban is natural. India's Defence Minister

A.K. Anthony has said that his country too faced the danger of Taliban.

This makes the elimination of Taliban the topmost priority. At present, the Pakistan army and America plan, control and pursue the operation. Were India to send its forces, as is the reported request by the US, it would be a development that the Pakistan army might not like. Still, the Indian and Pakistani forces fighting side by side against the Taliban would create a climate where Kashmir, the water dispute, and other problems would find consensus in no time.

The solution lies in both the civilian and the military wings in Pakistan agreeing to a détente with India. But the army has given no evidence that it wants to bury the hatchet. Its proximity to America and the military aid it is getting from it has made Islamabad stiffer than before.

The Manmohan Singh-Gilani meeting in Egypt, or the meeting of foreign secretaries, would be successful only to the extent Gen. Parvez Kayani is willing to go. Can he look at Pakistan's relations with India without bringing in the past? Normalcy between the two countries depends on that. Washington can play an important role.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.