

Between the Two Rivers, Lack of Water Kills

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BAGHDAD, Aug 17 (IPS) - The collapse of Iraq's infrastructure has created a worsening water crisis that is killing untold numbers of Iraqis.

Iraq, with its famous Tigris and Euphrates rivers that run the length of the country, is now unable to provide drinking water to most of its people.

"The two rivers are still there, great as they always were, and flowing all through the year," chief engineer Ahmad Salman of the Baghdad Water Authority told IPS. "Yet Iraqis are thirsty, and we are ashamed of being engineers in the service. We have simply failed to provide our people with half of the drinking water they need."

Much of the country is suffering severe lack of water, and the small quantities supplied are not good for human use.

"I analysed the water supplied by the water authority, and the result was shocking," Dr Ibrahim Ali, a laboratory owner in Baghdad told IPS. "It is definitely not good for human consumption, and every time we analyse it we find something new that might, in time, cause death."

The doctor added, "Various kinds of bacterial pollution and germs we are finding can be as dangerous as biological weapons."

Iraqi hospitals are full of people with illnesses due to the unsafe water. Doctors at several hospitals confirmed to IPS that water is one of the worst causes of diseases, especially among children, and that some of children had died of water-borne diseases compounded by a severe lack of medicines.

These problems are exacerbated during the summer when both the quantity and quality of water are at their lowest.

"One of the reasons for this lack of water is lack of electric power and fuel for generators," a member of a local municipal council in Baghdad, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IPS. "We have got tired of raising our needs for the water stations because our ministers and their leaders are busy fighting over chairs so that they make as much money as possible before they are thrown away."

U.S. ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker acknowledged to reporters Jul. 19 that Baghdad residents were receiving on average only one hour of electricity a day. Before the U.S.-led invasion, Baghdad residents received 16-24 hours of electricity daily. Without electricity, water cannot be pumped to homes.

A report released Jul. 30 by the international agency Oxfam and NCCI, a network of aid organisations working in Iraq, said that eight million Iraqis, nearly one in three, were in dire need of emergency aid.

The report, 'Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq' said that 70 percent of Iraqis are without adequate water supplies, compared to 50 percent in 2003, the year the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was launched. About 80 percent of Iraqis lack effective sanitation, the report said.

According to the Oxfam report, "child malnutrition rates have risen from 19 percent before the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 to 28 percent now." Lack of potable water is at the root of most such conditions.

"It is corruption more than anything else," an engineer at the Baghdad Water Authority, who did not wish to be named, told IPS. "The authority is full of corruption from bottom to top, and there is no way to improve the situation unless the political situation is improved by removing these corrupt officials."

An IPS correspondent was advised not to go to the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources in the face of a danger of being kidnapped by security men at the ministry.

"It is another weapon that the Americans are killing us with," 62-year-old Abu Mahmood, a carpenter from Baghdad told IPS. "No water means diseases that lead to slow, but certain death. They did it to us at the time of sanctions and now it is their chance to do it again without firing bullets and making scandals."

Few Iraqis see hope under the present government. "The problem is that we do not have a government like any other country," Baghdad resident Nabhan Mukhlis told IPS. "We should just stop complaining and surrender to the death penalty that was issued the day Americans decided to invade our country."

(*Ali, our correspondent in Baghdad, works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, our U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who travels extensively in the region)

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