

# Water shortage despite forewarning

By Zafar Samdani

A CRISIS of water availability had been looming over the country for some years back. Except a few experts and one or two politicians, no one took the issue seriously; in fact nobody in a position of authority looked at the possibility of water shortage as a calamity knocking at Pakistan's door.

It is a grim reality today: demonstrators are out on the roads in Karachi; farmers are wailing in the Punjab because of a backbreaking rise in the cost of production owing to high reliance on tubewells which are only pumping out brackish water in many areas.

Decision-makers in Islamabad are merely groping in the dark. There is a daily dose of propositions on how to counter the acute shortage of irrigation water that has triggered fears of a drought. The government has finally taken a decision: it has lowered crop targets! But the decision was not for the authorities to make. Crops need to be irrigated and targets cannot be achieved with insufficient irrigation water. What the federal ministry of food, agriculture and livestock has actually done is that it has accepted the reality. The step is thus an exercise in self-assurance that the government is in control of the situation. There is no evidence that it is. Rhetoric has lost its effectiveness due to excessive use, like over-watering leading to water-logging.

Targets were lowered per

force. As reservoirs dried and torrents in northern areas shrank to trickles, rivers were reduced to mud and slush and nature did not come to Pakistan's rescue with timely rains—this has indeed been an exceptionally rainless season and the few drops that have fallen were not ideally timed. The Indus River System Authority (IRSA) juggled with increasingly evaporating resources, playing with provincial quotas, and appealing to the provinces to display patriotism. It kept, not callously but because it could not act otherwise, farmers on

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tenterhooks. As a result, the growth of the wheat crop in the fields was stunted and the grain shrivelled. In this backdrop, a downward revision of production targets is hardly a feat of great wisdom. Nothing else could have been done.

The government is aware of the consequences. In early March, the federal finance secretary told a press conference in Karachi that progress in the field of agriculture would be down to zero because of the water crisis. Last year's growth rate of 7.1 per cent in the agriculture sector could even plunge to minus one, he said. More

recently, the federal finance minister reduced the impact of water shortage to statistics, announcing that the loss in the agriculture sector could be around two billion dollars. It would be more if food imports become imperative. But the acknowledgement of signals of impending disaster is not the same thing as damage control. Neither does a scuttling of targets help. What is needed is a strategy to arrest the decline and improve resources. Nothing seems to be on the anvil on this count.

There was time for formulating such plans. In an interview with this writer in July 1993, Shamsul-Mulk, then member water in WAPDA, had warned about the depletion of resources. He had pointed out that at the time of independence, the quantum of surface water resources per capita per average year was around 5,000 cu. metres. "Over the last 45 years, this resource figure has shrunk to a mere 1,400 cu. metres due to population increase. The population growth projections over the next 15 to 20 years may have the picture even gloomier and the per capita water figure may dwindle to just 800 cu. meters," he had said.

Shamsul Mulk had warned that if "planners do not pay heed to the impending scarcity to devise and implement responses, it would have major implications for all consumers of water which include agricultural, industrial, domestic and municipal, and environmental areas". From a water-affluent society, Pakistan was moving towards becoming a water-poor

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country, he had said. He had stressed the importance of sustainability of the 'Indus Food Machine', describing it as essential for ensuring food security for the nation but "it is possible only if it receives the highest national priority" by preparing an action plan comprising emphasis on "conservation, demand management, efficiency of water use and quality management".

Much of the water flowing down the rivers since then has dried up and the aquifer is not being recharged efficiently. Sedimentation has significantly reduced the capacity of the existing reservoirs and new ones have not been built. Meanwhile, the water situation continues worsening.

He has been proved, most unfortunately for Pakistan, wrong: the crisis he had feared has overtaken Pakistan in less than eight years time instead of 15-20 years as per his warning; we are down to around 1,000 cu. metres water per capita per year. Population has continued to explode during this period; water-wasting practices have gone on unchecked; the need for conservation is just being realized and demands are being managed by managing allocations.

What should have been taken as a wake-up call fell on deaf ears. Hearing may not be impaired any more but one does not see anything concrete in the planners' pipeline. Agricultural fields cannot anyhow be irrigated by patriotism, promises or pledges, howsoever sincere they may be.

Shamsul Mulk had also warned that if proper measures were not immediately taken, "we shall be faced with the unthinkable prospect of 'food shedding' within a few years". If the tide in the water sector was not turned, that could be the next milestone. The government knows exactly what is to be done. What is required is courage to act decisively. That is the least a military government can do. But if dithering remains the rule, despair would be inevitable wages for the nation.