

Water crisis might hit kharif crops

By Intikhab Hanif

LAHORE, March 9: The irrigation authorities in the Punjab on Friday termed the current water shortage a blow to the wheat crop in the province, saying the situation would create more problems during the forthcoming kharif season if it did not rain adequately.

The main kharif crops are cotton, rice and sugarcane which are sown from April to June. These are the hot and dry months and crops are dependent on water reservoirs which are dry, and snow over the hilltops has been negligible this year.

Talking to *Dawn*, the authorities said the province had cut 70 per cent supplies to all its canals from March 1 and the situation would remain so till it rained and the level of dams increased.

As an emergency measure, the province was releasing only 30 per cent of water to its 24 major canals in the province. Releases to the tributaries attached to these canals were being rationed for 10 days each, they said.

They explained that all branch canals were being divided into three groups, each having water for 10 days. During this time there has been no supplies for the remaining two groups.

The authorities said at this time of the season wheat crop required full time last watering. And the shortage of supplies would definitely affect the growth and size of the grain.

They said priority was being given to the supply of canal

water to the areas having brackish underground reserves which were not suitable for crops.

The authorities said the water shortage would mainly affect the wheat crop in the Punjab as it had already been matured in Sindh. "But definitely Sindh requires adequate supplies for other crops," they said.

Meanwhile, a Wapda spokesman has said the outflows from Tarbela have not been stopped but were being matched to the inflows. The releases were being made basically for irrigation purposes and power generation was a secondary benefit.

He said Tarbela's dead level of 1,369ft had to be maintained for the safety of the dam and tunnels and to avoid sediment management problems.

Last year, he said, a high technical risk was taken and the level was brought down to 1,321.80ft on April 19, 2000, to support the rabi crops which required extra water. This led to the sediment management problem and the delta drifted down towards the dam by about 2.5 miles, endangering its structure and choking the tunnels. Meanwhile, the level at Tarbela was 1,369.34ft and Mangla at 1,043ft on Friday. The inflow at Tarbela was 13,500 cusecs and Mangla 7,100 cusecs against their releases of 13,500 cusecs and 6,300 cusecs, respectively.

The Indus at Chashma (downstream) was at 19,900 cusecs, the Chenab at Marala 5,600 cusecs and the Kabul at Noshera 2,700 cusecs.

Corporatization of agriculture

By Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

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THE federal cabinet has recently approved a corporate farming initiative — a move that has been in the pipeline for quite some time — amidst reports that the decision met some resistance from within the ruling circles, particularly from those who were aware that the new move could have undesirable impact on poor and landless farmers.

But, before the decision was taken, it is worth noticing that attractive brochures explaining enormous benefits of corporatization of agriculture were already in circulation for to influence the ultimate decision. Then, that there is mention of corporate farming in the federal budget, and also in the Interim-Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (IPRSP) — a document which has already become an economic bible of this regime — is quite intriguing.

So, the approval of the initiative was somewhat a foregone conclusion. As with just about every other major decision of this government, the nature of this initiative — what it really means, who it will affect and how, and a variety of other issues — is being kept away from the common folks because the very concept of corporate farming is elite-biased.

The fact remains that with the corporatization of agriculture, foreign and domestic companies can lease unlimited tracts of land from the government and till this land for indefinite period of time. The stated objective again is to maximize the productivity of the land by making the agricultural sector more capital-intensive. All objective observers now agree that the effects of mechanization and the Green Revolution were almost unequivocally negative for small and landless farmers.

Pakistani small landholders already face negative terms of trade for agriculture commodities, rising prices of inputs, and the growing influence of the World Trade Organisation. Corporate farming will simply worsen the problems small and landless farmers face, and might even start a process of displacement like during the green

revolution.

It is clear that large landholders will also benefit from this policy, especially given the fact that the new labour laws will not apply to those workers who will work on corporate farms. It is difficult to understand how a farmer tilling five acres of land can possibly make ends meet when he is forced to compete with a multinational that handles twenty thousand acres.

This is especially true given the fact that the government continues to sign agreements with the international financial institutions such as the agricultural sector reform loan of \$350 million signed with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) that has resulted in halving the amount of wheat the government buys at the support price from farmers.

All in all, the notion of progress that is being propagated completely ignores the rights of future generations, while also allowing the concentration of resources in the hands of the elite. It emphasizes a maximization of profit and resource use, and incentives to the private sector. All of this is aside from the cronyism and institutionalized corruption that has proliferated in recent years.

Going back to the case of wheat procurement, it is said that military men and local influentials were given priority in the purchase process to such an extent that many farmers ended up selling their harvests for two-thirds of the original support price on the open market. For the majority of farmers, this price did not even cover their costs.

Also becoming increasingly visible are certain actions that demonstrate how misplaced the pro-poor notions of this government are. The landless tenants in Punjab province are currently facing unprecedented violence and harassment, as they agitate for ownership rights. Five tenants have been killed and numerous are due to be prosecuted under anti-terrorist legislation. Meanwhile, documents such as the IPRSP offer colourful descriptions of how the state is actively promoting the redistribution of assets by

allotting state land to landless tenants.

What has happened in recent months is that one finds lack of transparency in the decision-making process. Second, this trend also indicates that the actual mandate of the elected government that will come into being in October will simply be to put their stamp on a policy agenda that has already been set in store.

Aside from land, if one considers the two other natural resources over which most power disputes take place, that is water and forest, the state has reinforced its traditional usurping role whenever the military has been in power. General Musharraf's tenure has been no different. Mega water projects have become a priority for this government. In yet another high-level meeting this past month, a host of new projects were approved, including Meerani dam and Kacchi canal.

In this meeting it was also pointed out that the controversial Greater Thal Canal will irrigate 1.5 million acres of land in southern and south-west Punjab. It is worth making a trip to the Thal area, where small boards are to be found at regular intervals warning dogs and cars to stay away from particular areas because the land is the property of such and such colonel, brigadier, or general.

Meanwhile, the original Thal Canal (yes, how many people actually know that the Thal Canal already exists, and that the Greater Thal Canal is a separate project altogether?) contains hardly a drop of water. The official argument being propagated in favour of the new project is that Pakistan needs growth, and for growth, one needs to make more intensive use of available land. It seems to matter little that the precious little water we have is being channelled toward state lands allotted to retired army officials.

The new forest laws being promulgated almost completely disregard traditional rights of the communities which are completely dependent on the forest to meet their livelihood needs. Meanwhile, royalties in excess of Rs. 80 crores are still out-

standing in the case of such communities in Dir, Kohistan where the local forest department, in connivance with the "timber mafia", has pillaged the area, while depriving local communities of their rightful shares. Here, too, the development paradigm at work stresses the need to exploit our natural resources to the fullest.

In the coastal areas of the country, foreign corporate trawlers have been given incentives to cast their mile-long nets into the water and maximize the amount of fish that can be caught, and, therefore, sold for profit. Disregarded are those estimates that suggest that over 80% of the fish stock in Pakistan's territory has been depleted, and many species of fish have already gone extinct.

It is no longer possible for large sections of our intelligentsia or civil society to look anyone in the eye and claim that the military government has a liberal face. If it does have a liberal face, it is the neo-liberal face, the recent budget having confirmed that pleasing international financial institutions (IFIs) concocting an "investor-friendly" budget is far more important than meeting the needs of the Pakistani population.

On all fronts, corporatization is being emphasized while the concerns of the working classes are being treated as minor issues. It is true that Pakistan is part of a worldwide trend in this regard, and that increasing state repression is also being promoted as a result of a global shift toward authoritarianism. But it is high time that this downward spiral is arrested. Civil society in other countries has resisted many of these advances by state structures, but in Pakistan it remains largely coopted.

The promises that were liberally made by General Musharraf, particularly during his referendum campaign, suggested that landless tenants would be allotted state land, the shelterless would be given shelter, the working class would have their basic rights protected, and the average consumer would be given relief. All of these promises have proved to be completely false. ■