Water scarcity and riparian rights

By Ashfak Bokhari

WATER shortage in the country has assumed alarming proportions following reduced flows in the western rivers from their sources in Indian-held Kashmir and, as a corollary, it is aggravating tension over sharing of available water among the provinces.

Last week, an Indian delegation was in Pakistan for a routine inspection of water-related sites and Pakistan's Indus Water commissioner Syed Jamaat Ali Shah held talks with its members on the issue of low flows on the sidelines because no meeting was scheduled between the two sides during the inspection visit.

Later, a Pakistan team of inspectors was scheduled to visit water-related projects in Indian Kashmir.

India is currently constructing three hydropower projects on River Indus. These include Chutak Dam with 59- meter height, Nimoo Bazgo with 57-metre height and Dumkhar of 42-meter height. These projects are at initial or middle stages of construction. Pakistan has repeatedly sought river flow data from India to ascertain the actual flow of western rivers at their source but the latter had cold-shouldered the request. Under the 1960 Indus Water Treaty India is bound to share the data with Pakistan. Under the treaty it cannot interfere with the flow of western rivers before they enter Pakistan but it does so blatantly.

Other violations are: India is irrigating about 800,000 acres in Chenab area which is not permissible; it has built five more canals in the past 10 years to increase the irrigated area in the region. Pakistan has also asked India to provide details of its agricultural acreage, crops and other projects in Kashmir to enable it to make plans in advance.

Low inflows are in evi-

impression to our water ministry and Indus water commissioner that India was not tampering with the flow. It proved, they said, that India was stealing Pakistan's share of river waters.

They want Pakistan to seek revision of the 1991 river water distribution agreement with India to get more water from Jhelum, Chenab and Indus rivers.

Current estimates of 104MAF flow in Indus, Jhelum and Chenab rivers during dry weather and 114MAF in the event of rainfall were not realistic and required to be revised.

Although, Pakistan has asked India to proportionately reduce its water use if and when there is an abnormal decline in river water, the latter often ignores it. Many observers are of the view that the low flow in Pakistan's rivers has little to do with lack of rains. It is primarily because India is controlling the water flow of western rivers, namely, the Indus, Chenab and Jhelum which were given to Pakistan under the Indus treaty and India has nothing to do with them. Pakistan complained to the World Islamabad fears that the Kishanganga hydro-power project, being constructed on Ganges River to generate 330MW, which on entry into Pakistan becomes Neelum River, will reduce water levels downstream in the plains of Punjab, thus threaten irrigation and power projects. The Kishanganga dam is located in the remote area of Gurez in the Himalayas, 123km from Srinagar.

The river water is being diverted, through a long tunnel, into the Wullar lake. This will change the course of the Neelum River by about 200 kilometres and will join the Jhelum River through Wullar lake in the Baramulla district. As a consequence of this diversion, Pakistan's Neelum valley is likely to dry up and become a desert.

A visiting scholar, Arshad H. Abbasi, while writing on this project in this newspaper, wonders why this has not yet been addressed by the ministry of water and power. Most probably Pakistan is unaware of the fact that India had already diverted the Ganges river at Farrakka by building a barrage, which has brought en-

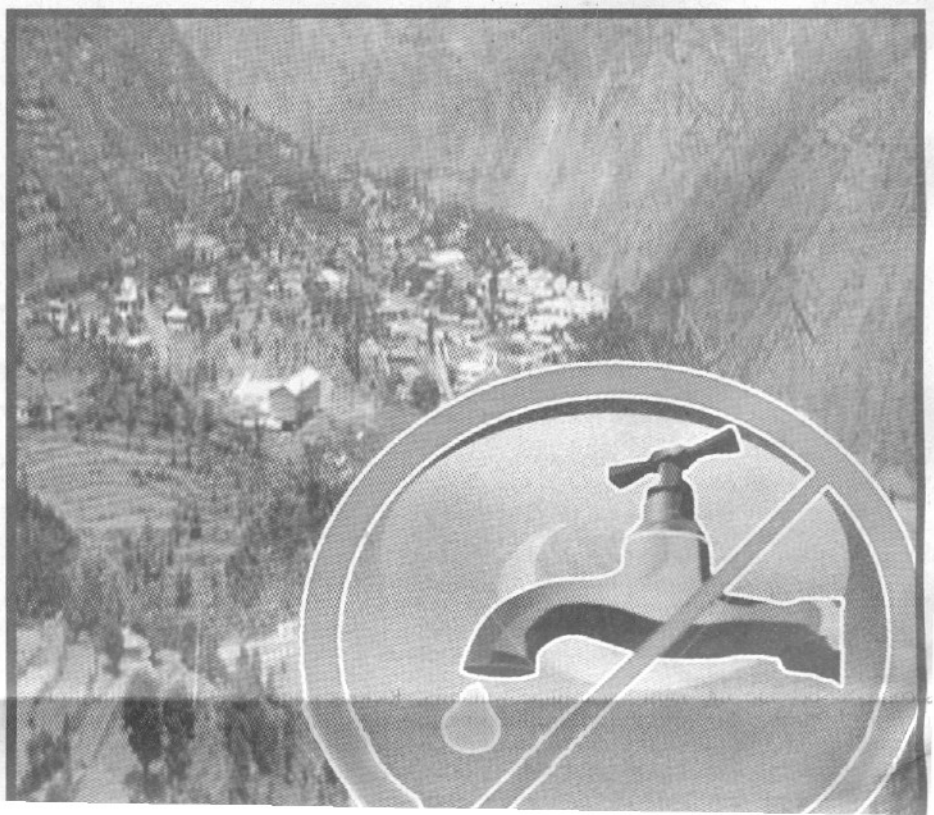
Neelum river is not only a violation of the Indus Water Treaty signed in 1960 but also of the Helsinki Rule signed in 1966 regarding water rights pertaining to international rivers.

According to this law, all basin states of an international river have the right to access an equitable and reasonable share of the water flow.

Meanwhile, the Indus River System Authority (Irsa) is making hectic efforts to sort out differences between Sindh and Punjab. There exists a serious feud over how much water should go to Sindh and Punjab. The problem is that water available for the current Rabi crop is already reduced by 34 per cent because of low flow.

An Irsa spokesman describes the situation as persistently drought-like because of continuing water shortage. Meanwhile, water level at Mangla Dam dropped last week below 0.3 MAF, which means that Sindh and Balochistan could get 0.1 MAF water.

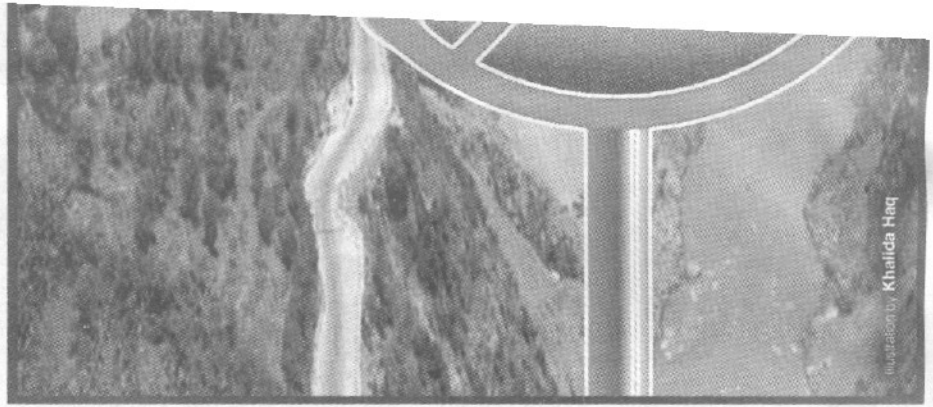
The continuing drought in the country has not only made the Rabi crops target doubtful, it is also likely to



Low inflows are in evidence in the Rivers Chenab and Jhelum for the past several months. In particular, the flow of the Chenab has become very low after the construction of Baglihar Hydropower project. In recent months, flows of the River Jhelum have also not been consistent.

On January 20, the water flow in Chenab was found to have fallen to about 6,000 from 10,000 cusecs, the average flow during the recent years, mainly because of ongoing construction of over a dozen hydropower projects upstream, unauthorised use of water by farmers in Jammu, poor rainfall because of El Nino effect and diversion of river waters, according to a report appearing in this newspaper. This is about 40 per cent decline.

But three leaders of farmers communities in Punjab and Sindh told the media in Lahore on February 10 that the water flow in Chenab River suddenly jumped up to 15,000 cusecs during the stay of Indian water delegation in Pakistan to give an



Bank (WB) regarding hydropower projects initiated by India but a neutral expert appointed by the WB rejected most of the objections, especially with regard to the Baglihar Dam on Chenab River.

It only asked India to make some changes in the dam's height. After Baglihar, it is the Kishanganga project which is creating the same problem. Pakistan tried to resolve the issue at commissioner level but failed. Syed Jamaat Ali Shah intends to raise the issue with a third party.

According to him, the diversion of Ganges waters was an engineering blunder in the history of water engineering. Arsenic contamination in Bangladesh began after the dam's construction and diversion of the water in 1975. The lowering of the water table resulted in exposure to air in the zone of aeration. This exposure resulted in the oxidation of arsenic minerals previously present below the water table.

The diversion of the

vironmental and economic disaster to Bangladesh.

badly affect the Kharif crop output as the weather forecast says that the El-Nino phenomenon, which reduced Pakistan's monsoon rainfall by about 30 per cent last year is likely to continue till the next summer. This is an alarming situation because, being an agrarian economy, Pakistan can face a huge food deficit. Sindh wants Punjab to release additional water for it because, as it claims, Punjab had promised to give it "surplus water" after the reopening of canals after January 31.