

Using water as a weapon of war

By Dr Hezri Adnan

FORCED WATER SCARCITY: water problems of Palestinians caused by double-standard policies of Israel

WHEN the Mongols raided Mesopotamia (now Iraq), they caused a damaging environmental change by destroying crops, livestock and villages. Deliberately, they also demolished the major irrigation works of the Tigris River.

The motive was clearly to disrupt agriculture and the livelihood of farmers. But back then, nobody would think of war as an environmental offence.

Eight centuries later, in 1991, a coalition of 34 countries mobilised thousands of tanks and war machines in the Gulf area to fight Iraq against its invasion of Kuwait. The pulverised desert surface created favourable conditions for dust pollution, leading to more frequent episodes of dust storms in the region.

The coalition, in its Operation Desert Storm, also bombed oil facilities, causing spills of six to eight million barrels of crude oil. This gruesome act ended up killing more than 30,000 marine birds. Worse, this bombardment also poisoned Iraqi water supplies in violation of the Geneva Protocol, which prohibits the deliberate starvation of civilians.

In a tit-for-tat retaliation, the Iraqis flared up more than 730 oil wells and pipelines. Not only did the fires take eight months to extinguish, but they also released black carbon soot into the atmosphere well beyond the Middle East. Some parts of Japan, for instance, experienced black snow for a week during the First Gulf War.

Thus, the environment and natural resources are an integral part of war, usually as a target, sometimes as a weapon. The sobering lesson is that whichever side wins, there is only one loser in every war — the environment.

Less conspicuous to most is when the environment is subtly used as a weapon to oppress the weak without any bellicose action.

The plight of the Palestinians is a showcase of how water resources are used as a natural weapon to strengthen Israeli hegemony. Contrary to popular views, the Palestinians' water shortage is not a result of geographical or climatic misfortune. Instead, it is caused by Israeli occupation policies.

Shortly after the West Bank was occupied in 1967, Israel, through its Military Order No. 2, declared all water resources as its state property. This military order barred the Palestinians all access to and from any use of the Jordan River system, the only surface water resource in the West Bank.

Today, all water utilised by the Palestinians there is derived from the Mountain Aquifer, an underground source that is shared with the Israelis.

Far from practising equitable sharing, Israel exercises monopoly. It controls the drilling of new wells through a permit system. For existing wells, Israel enforces fixed pumping quotas, with heavy fines in cases of violation. Between 1967 and 1990, only 23 permits were issued for the Palestinians to drill new wells, with 20 of them for domestic use and only three for agriculture. The number of existing wells also decreased from 413 to 300 because of a prohibition on restoring damaged wells.

The other reason is that Israeli water companies Mekorot and Tahal are digging deeper wells from the shared aquifer, causing many shallow Palestinian wells to dry up. For piped water, Palestinian consumers pay the full US\$1.20 (RM3.80) per cubic metre rate, whereas Jewish settlers are



An elderly Palestinian women carrying a bucket amid destroyed buildings in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza Strip. The situation in Gaza is dehumanising, as residents are forced to scavenge for water after Israel destroyed Gaza's water facilities. EPA pic

subsidised at US\$ 0.40 per cubic metre. It is no surprise when Israelis in the West Bank can comfortably consume more than ten times as much water as the Palestinians.

The situation in the Gaza Strip is even more dehumanising. An arid area with a population density of 2,000 people per square kilometre, the region faces a forced water scarcity problem almost unparalleled in the world. Gaza's water supply is currently insufficient to cater to demand and is increasingly degraded by sewage pollution.

Approximately 80,000 cubic metres of sewage are pumped into the Mediterranean every day untreated since the bombing of wastewater treatment facilities. There are also reports of water from Gaza's precious coastal aquifer being piped out to support agriculture in Israel.

As a result, the Palestinians suffer from intermittent supplies of piped water and are often forced to survive on tanked supplies for a long period. Ironically, at the international level, Israel projects itself as a country that provides a world-class solution to drought and water scarcity challenges.

The unpalatable truth is that Israel does not have a water problem because it takes water away from the Palestinians. Maybe, it is time for the international community to consider the usage of water as a weapon as a categorical crime against humanity.

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