



## **Iraq Water Crisis Could Stir Ethnic Clash**

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BAGHDAD (UPI) -- Iraq is facing worsening water shortages caused by the failure of successive postwar governments to ensure supplies and extensive dam-building in neighboring states that could trigger sectarian conflict.

"One prediction, which has yet to come true, has been made repeatedly by former U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali since 1988: That the Middle East will at some point in the future see war break out over access to water," the Middle East Economic Digest observed.

"Boutros-Ghali thought an interstate war would occur because of disputes over the ownership of the Nile. This has yet to happen.

"But if policymakers in Baghdad do not act soon, water could well be the source of renewed strife, not between Baghdad and its neighbors, but between Iraq's already deeply divided population," the weekly warned.

"If water availability in the country continues to fall and the quality of what is on offer is not increased, the government will have no one to blame but itself."

International aid organizations have been reporting an increase in violent incidents concerning water supply.

This is happening against a worrying backdrop of mounting sectarian violence between Iraq's majority Shiites, who dominate the government and the security forces, and the minority Sunnis who lost power when Saddam Hussein's dictatorship was toppled after the U.S.-invasion of March 2003.

With U.S. forces withdrawn from Iraq, government forces under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki haven't been able to contain a wave of bombings and assassinations by Sunni groups, including al-Qaida.

Shiite vengeance on a significant scale may not be long in coming and with it the risk of a sectarian civil war.

Iraq's water comes primarily from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Both rise in Turkey, which has constructed a chain of dams over the last decade, with more to come. This has drastically reduced the flow of water into Iraq.

Syria, which has also suffered because of the Turkish dams, and Iran have been building dams too, further cutting the river flows from the north and the east into a country that until the late 1950s was a breadbasket for the Arab world.

Iraqi farmers recently blocked border crossings from Iran east of Baghdad to protest Tehran's diversion of the al-Wind River that irrigates one of Iraq's largest agricultural areas.

"Cutting water is a crime against life," the farmers' leader declared.

"Iran has diverted 15 tributaries to the Tigris since 2006 alone," observed Casey Walther, who, until earlier this month, was UNESCO's American water projects coordinator in Iraq.

Two new Iranian dams could potentially cut off water to two of Iraq's main dams at Haditha in the northwest and Mosul in the north.

"I visited them last summer and were already down to about 50 percent of capacity," said Walther.

Maliki's government, and those that came before under U.S. auspices, have failed dismally in addressing the worsening problem, which has been exacerbated by climate change and poor control over resources.

Officials say accurate data on water aren't available, making water security almost impossible to achieve. Walther says this is a critical failure by the government.

"All the numbers you see are estimates and often outdated," he said. "Iraqi officials cannot negotiate with neighboring Turkey or Syria, which control the flow of the Euphrates and Tigris."

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With tension over the dwindling water supply escalating, Walther said he fears the worst.

"I'm concerned that when you look at the hydrological makeup of the country, the water comes from the northwest and travels down to the southeast, which is pretty much the country's ethnic fault lines," he observed.

Authorities in the semi-autonomous Kurdish enclave that spans three provinces in northeastern Iraq are building 11 dams, a move that's likely to inflame ethnic tensions over water.

These have storage capacities that range from 35 million-350 million cubic feet.

"We have studies and designs to build 28 more," Kurdish Regional Government Agriculture Minister Jameel Suleiman announced last March.

Water is a particularly virulent source of tension between Iraq's Kurds and Arab provinces.

In multiethnic Kirkuk province, a flash point in territorial disputes between Arabs and Kurds, Arab farmers complain that Kurdistan shuts them off from the water held by its dams.

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