

Working Group 5

War over water – The case of the Ilisu dam project in Turkey

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Introduction – Water disputes in the next millennium.

Water is considered a major cause of international conflict in the next millennium. ‘Wars of the next century will be over water.’ This warning comes from the World Bank, the largest international investor in water projects. Klaus Töpfer, head of the United Nations Environmental Program, warns about extreme conflicts caused by already severe water scarcities. Nato’s Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society (CCMS) is dealing with water as a security risk. In 1994 the Center of Strategic and International Studies in Washington identified 10 regions where water could become a reason for conflict; almost every dam project increases tension between or within states. The CIA knows that water interests and water problems are nowhere greater than in the Middle East. On May 21, 1997, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, designed to prevent border disputes and wars between states that share water resources; Turkey was one of only three countries (together with China and Burundi) to vote against it.

The Case of the Ilisu Dam in Turkey

The South-Eastern Anatolia Development Project (GAP) is a huge \$32 billion hydropower and irrigation scheme, which was initiated in the 1970s and is due to be completed in 2010. It involves 22 dams, 19 hydroelectric power plants and a network of irrigation canals for the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. It is planned that at full development over 1.7 million ha of land will be irrigated and 27 billion kWh of electricity will be generated annually with an installed capacity of over 7,500MW. Both rivers rise in Turkey, where they gather about 90% and 50% of the water respectively, before flowing through Syria and Iraq.

The Ilisu dam is the latest \$1.5 billion project, currently the largest of Turkey, located on the Tigris River, 40 miles upstream of the Syrian-Iraq border, in the heart of the Kurdish populated area. A rockfill dam, 1820 metres long and 135 metres high, will create a reservoir with a maximum volume of 10.4 billion cubic meters and a surface area of 313 square kilometres. It has a capacity of 1,200MW, and is expected to produce 3,800 GWh of hydroelectric power annually; it will also be used for irrigation. Demand for electricity is increasing by 8% a year in Turkey and frequent power cuts are inhibiting economic growth.

The claims of Turkey, Syria and Iraq on the water of the Euphrates and Tigris exceed the capacities by 55% and 12% respectively.

Consequences

The dams on the Euphrates, used primarily for irrigation, reduce the average water flow by almost 50%; the Tigris projects, primarily used for power production, will reduce the average water flow by 10%. In addition, the water quality will be degraded through salination, pesticides, and a reduction in mud (as natural fertiliser) and fish.

The dams give Turkey control over the water supplies of Syria and Iraq, as spare capacity of the reservoirs – the difference between maximum and normal operational capacity – will be sufficient to block any water flowing to Syria and Iraq for several months.

The Ilisu reservoir will flood 52 villages and 15 towns, including Hasankeyef, a Kurdish town of 5,500 people, which is the only town in Anatolia that has survived since the Middle Ages and is under archaeological protection. It will displace approximately 16,000 people in the trouble Kurdish region.

Turkish objectives

The main (official) objective is the development in the poor south-east, both economically and socially, including communication, housing, industry education, health and other services. According to Olecay Ünver, President of the GAP Regional Development Administration, 'The GAP Master Plan's basic development scenario is to transform the region into an agro-related export base.' and '... prosperity will be evident for everyone except the most prejudiced and opinionated.' Displacing thousands of rebel Kurds gives an opportunity for controlling them better.

The development of the region is achieved by increasing the water resources for irrigation and domestic and industrial consumption (at the expenses of the downstream countries), and the large-scale and centralised generation of electricity, which is also easier to control than the small-scale and distributed.

The control over water supplies gives Turkey a strategic advantage, e.g. as a bargain against Syria's and Iraq's support for the PKK.

Contractors, Creditors and Foreign involvement

The World Bank refused to back the project in 1984. The Ilisu project appears to violate five of its guidelines (OD 4.00 (Annex A, Environmental Assessment, and Annex B, Environmental Policy for Dam and Reservoir Projects), OD 4.30 (Involuntary Resettlement), OP 7.50 (Projects on International Waterways), OPN 11.03 (Management of Cultural Property) and BP 17.50 (Disclosure of Operational Information)), and it also contradicts the UN Convention on Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. Instead the Turkish government appointed a Swiss hydro-electric company, Sulzer Hydro, and ABB Power Generation, a Swiss-Swedish company, to organise the project. The firm then approached the British company Balfour Beatty* to head the construction consortium in nine countries (including Impregilo (Italy), Skanska (Sweden), and the three Turkish companies Nuro, Kiska and Tekfen). The financial package is being arranged by the Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS). The World Bank's refusal to back the project meant that private banks regarded the project as too risky and the consortium had to find governments that would underwrite the project. They have submitted applications for export credit guarantees of about \$850 million to nine countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, the U.K., and the U.S.).

Most export credit agencies have few or no environmental or ethical standards, including Britain's Export Credit Guarantee Department (ECGD), which is part of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). British trade minister Stephen Byers announced only on August 2, 1999, after much pressure also from this case that there will be a review of the criteria for export credit guarantees. By contrast the German government still refuses to do so.

Some people warned that the Ilisu project could risk involving Britain in armed conflict between Syria, Iraq and Turkey (a Nato ally) over the right to water from the Tigris. If supported by Britain (and other countries), this project would be in sharp contrast to New Labour's ethical and environmental foreign policy.

Possible alternatives

In the environmental impact assessment, commissioned by Sulzer and ABB, no supply-side or demand-side alternatives to Ilisu have been considered as part of the feasibility studies. Renewable energies such as small scale hydro-electric power, passive solar, photovoltaics and wind energy are certainly good alternatives, as they can be distributed (no or little transmission losses) and tuned to needs and potentials. To generate the same amount of energy as the Ilisu dam project by photovoltaics, for example, only 7% of the total flooded area would be necessary. Political decision making processes seem to be the biggest obstacle of distributed and decentralised schemes.

The solution to the world's water crises lies less in the supply than in the demand. Improved water management, water recycling, efficiency improvements, avoiding of waste, and new technologies are just a few points.

* Balfour Beatty was the company at the centre of the Pergau dam battle in Malaysia. That project became mired in controversy after Britain ignored warnings that the project was unsuitable on environmental grounds and gave a large chunk of its aid budget to build the dam, because Malaysia was buying arms from British manufacturers.

Conclusion

In the Ilisu case, the project is largely political and predominantly motivated by the strategic interest of the Turkish government to strengthen its position of power in the Middle East, and to control the unruly Kurdish areas.

This puts downstream countries in a strategically and materially disadvantageous position, and therefore threatens their national security. Independent of the evaluation of large-scale dam projects such as Ilisu, it is at the expenses of the downstream countries.

In November 1998 Turkey showed its military strength in a 50,000 men military exercise close to the Syrian border. As long as one country is clearly militarily superior, the risk of a military conflict over water are reduced, as the smaller country has no chance to win a war – until the situation is desperate enough to risk it anyway.

Negotiations about fair sharing of water resources are urgently required.

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