

Possible Indo-Pak tension on Indus water sharing?

Harun ur Rashid ,

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On 10 August, while message of cooperation and peace was being exchanged in Islamabad, between parliamentarians of India and Pakistan, a possible tension between the two nations was feared to erupt on water sharing of the Indus Water.

The partition of British India in 1947 proved to be a traumatic experience. One of the most savaging effects was the unfair partition of the two premier provinces -- the Punjab and Bengal. In the divided provinces natural watercourses have been arbitrarily partitioned between the two nations and they had to address the difficult water-sharing problem. Many observers suspect the way the British left India in 1947 raised questions as to whether the British wanted India and Pakistan after the partition to be in peace.

During the last 50 years India and Pakistan fought three wars in 1948, 1965 on Kashmir and in 1971 that led to independent Bangladesh. In 1999 they fought a limited war known as "Kargil war". Although some steps have now been taken to ease tense relationship between the two countries an uneasy calm prevails. This can be disrupted by disputes between the two nations.

The Indus River (1975 miles/3180 kilometres in length originates in western Tibet, flows through China and Kashmir and then turns south into Pakistan and falls into the Arabian Sea. The partition of the Punjab province had affected the water system of the Indus River and so also the five rivers (Chenab, Jhelum, Ravi, Sutlej and Beas) of the Punjab province.. At the time of partition in 1947, Sikh and Hindu farmers living in predominantly Muslim areas in west Punjab fled to the Indian-controlled eastern Punjab that was relatively dry and had few irrigated canals.

To address the water needs, India began in 1950 to build a canal system that diverted some of the flow from rivers in Pakistan. This led to a serious water dispute between the two countries. Eventually the World Bank and the US brokered the Indus Water Treaty in 1960 which stipulated that Pakistan would receive unrestricted use of the waters of western rivers, namely Indus, Jhelum and Chenab and would be

allowed, among others, to construct three dams and three barrages in Pakistan. A Permanent Indus Commission would be set up consisting of one commissioner from each country. The Commission would meet annually to promote smooth implementation of the 1960 Treaty. Both sides were satisfied with provisions of the Treaty.

In recent years of drought and record low snowfalls in the Himalayas, the once mighty Indus river is reported to be a mere trickle in some places. Aquifers (ground water) are being depleted, water tables are falling, waterways are severely polluted and soils are becoming acutely saline from overuse of underground water supplies. Furthermore populations increased in both countries. Demand for water comes not just from the need to drink, the need to wash and the need to deal with human waste. The really great calls on water supply come from industries in both countries. Furthermore, irrigating crops in both countries accounts for 70 per cent of all water uses. Both countries must not only maintain a supply of food and potable water for their increasing populations but also develop the hydroelectric potential of the river system that runs through their borderlands.

At present it appears that dispute of water rights on the Indus river between the two countries has re-surfaced. In December 2001, following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament, India openly raised the possibility of revoking the 1960 Treaty, as part of a strategy of coercive diplomacy with Pakistan. It was reported that the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security identified the cutting of a major water supply as a threat to use against Pakistan. For its part Pakistan began to argue that India had already effectively suspended the Treaty that same month, when the Indian Commissioner for the Treaty reportedly severed all contact with his Pakistani counterpart and cancelled a visit by Pakistani engineers.

The water dispute between India and Pakistan may be viewed in global perspective. Although water is the commonest stuff on earth, only 2.53 per cent of it is fresh, while the rest is salt. Of the freshwater, two-thirds is locked up in polar caps. What is available, in lakes, aquifers, rivers and rainfall run-off, is now increasingly coming under pressure from populations. In March of this year, UNESCO released a Report that stated that up to seven billion of people in 60 countries could face water shortage by the middle of this century and the crisis might reach unprecedented levels because world leaders lacked the will to act. According to UNESCO Director

General Koichiro Matsuura, the average supply of water available per person will drop by one-third within 20 years.

Furthermore underground water, the unseen source of life for two billion people is diminishing rapidly almost everywhere in the world according to a study by the UN Environment Programme. It is reported that about 96 per cent of Saudi Arabia's water and 69 per cent of Bangladesh's comes from below ground. There are 1300 bore-holes tapping water below Dhaka, and in some areas the water table has fallen by 40 meters.

Water-sharing from common international rivers is nothing new. According to a UN survey, out of 200 international rivers, 70 per cent of them are being shared by two countries. There are about 1228 water sharing treaties/agreements that had been concluded worldwide over the last 50 years.

If the water-sharing dispute is allowed to fester between the two nations over the 1960 Indus Water Treaty, it could fundamentally transform the Kashmir conflict (the Indus river flows through the Indian Kashmir), already one of the major threats to regional stability. Many political observers believe that the Indus Water dispute may end up being the crisis that may finally make that pressure for the rival countries too much to contain. We hope that commonsense may prevail and the potential water dispute may be settled amicably between the two nations.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.