



Kazakhs May Face Another Aral Sea Disaster, UN Says

ALMATY - Kazakhstan may face an ecological disaster on the scale of the drying out of the Aral Sea if it does not adopt better water management practices and win Chinese cooperation, the United Nations warned on Tuesday.

A 1960s Soviet plan to re-direct water for cotton irrigation from rivers that fed into the Aral Sea starved what was once the world's fourth largest lake of water, leaving two separate bodies of water in a wasteland of salty mud.

Central Asia's second biggest lake, Lake Balkhash, is now also in danger, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) said. Forty times the size of Lake Geneva, Balkhash lies 250 miles north of the Kazakh commercial city Almaty.

"We fear Lake Balkhash could meet a similar fate to the Aral Sea if current practice is not changed," said UNDP resident coordinator Fikret Akcura. "Just like the Aral Sea, there's less and less water coming to the lake."

The river Ili, the principal of seven tributaries leading to Lake Balkhash, flows from northwestern China's Xinjiang province into Kazakhstan and past Almaty on its way to Balkhash which lies wholly in Kazakhstan.

The lake, half salt and half fresh water, has already suffered from industrial pollution, but too much usage of the Ili's water in China could seal its fate.

"With the population growth curve, agriculture, industry, and urbanization in the western areas of China, there is of course going to be more water use on the Chinese side," Akcura told a news conference introducing a UNDP report on water in Kazakhstan.

Securing cooperation from former foe China could prove difficult as President Nursultan Nazarbayev -- who led Kazakhstan in the Soviet era -- has maintained closer links to Moscow than other neighboring states.

"This is a very sensitive political issue," said Zharas Takenov, the UNDP's environment team chief in Almaty.

"We lost the Aral Sea because we had several countries using the water. We have the same problem here. If there is no agreement with China on the amount of water it can use from the Ili, Balkhash will be damaged in the same way the Aral was."

UNDP said the other problem is Kazakhstan's own misuse of water. Although it now generates two-thirds of its export income from oil, gas and metals production and its agricultural output has shrunk since the early 1990s, farms still use the same amount of water and do not pay market rates for it. Large parts of the population -- as many as one in three in rural areas -- do not have access to clean drinking water and poor water has

become the country's greatest cause of disease. Soviet-era heavy industry remains a big polluter.

Although cleaning up drinking water requires investment, which Kazakhstan could fund with its new-found mineral wealth, Akcura said issues of water misuse do not need large sums of cash to resolve.

"It's mostly a question of changing attitudes and behaviors," he said.

Story by Michael Steen

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