

## **"Protecting the Mountain Aquifer"** **A missed opportunity**

Jerusalem, 19.12.03

Open Letter to Friends of the Earth, Middle East (FoEME)

The increasing pollution of the shared Israeli-Palestinian Mountain Aquifer, the biggest and best quality water resource for both people is a very serious issue. Therefore, it was a very welcome initiative to organize a high-ranking symposium of experts and players in the management of this precious resource to discuss – practically and scientifically – the reasons for the pollution processes and a strategy to face these threats.

The organizers of the symposium that took place in Tel Aviv University on Dec. 17, 2003, the Friends of the Earth Middle East and the Porter School of Environmental Studies are to be congratulated for their efforts. Many interesting papers on the issue were presented. Some papers were very detailed and do greatly advance the issue. It shall also be noted that the high level of the representatives from the Israeli political and academic sphere, as well as from the international donors in the water sector was a very promising sign for this symposium.

Unfortunately, most of the speakers, and the general tone of the meeting, fell into the line of brushing off Israeli responsibility for the decades of pollution in this large groundwater basin<sup>1</sup> blaming instead the Palestinian side as well as the donors for the Palestinian water projects for not building enough waste water treatment plants and appropriate solid waste sanitary land fills or for delaying the implementation of these urgent projects unnecessarily. As well Palestinians were blamed for showing a "general lack of understanding for the value and scarcity of water".

One speaker, the Minister of Infrastructure Paritzky, even pulled out a conspiracy theory, according to which, some Palestinian political circles purposefully pollute the aquifer as part of their struggle against Israel. While it is not worth to seriously address the issue of an imaginary "Al-Aqsa pollution brigade" any further, it is nonetheless necessary to provide some facts stemming from years of practical experience in international water cooperation with the Palestinians.

1.

It is somewhat surprising to hear, especially from the Israeli side, a loud and very aggressive accusation against the Palestinians for their failure to build treatment plants and solid waste dumping sites "after almost 10 years of autonomy, or - if we do not count the years of Intifadha – at least more than 5 years of Autonomy". Most of the speakers reiterated this blame – completely overlooking the fact that for more than 35 years, Israeli occupation<sup>2</sup> failed to invest in the infrastructure of the Palestinians in the West Bank, be it water supply, waste water or solid waste facilities, although this is considered a duty of any occupying force according to International Law. This is illustrated by the fact that several speakers in the symposium suggested building such plants for the illegal Israeli settlements but never mentioned an Israeli financial involvement in setting up treatment plants for the Palestinian populations' wastewater.

2.

Israel is a highly developed industrial society. Still, environmental issues in the Mountain Aquifer area were only seriously addressed after 1996, as Y. Bar-Or from the Ministry of Environment pointed out in the symposium. West Jerusalem's treatment plant is operating only since 1999. East Jerusalem has, as the same speaker noted, no treatment plant whatsoever while being clearly under Israeli jurisdiction.

3.

After 7 years of intensive practical and field work in German and British water projects related to the Mountain aquifer with different Palestinian partners, water authorities, municipalities and public utilities, my experience as well as that of anybody involved in the Palestinian water sector

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<sup>1</sup> Almost 99% of the irrigation water is either Israeli or settler water, the bulk of the industrial waste water is Israeli and both, the total and per-capita output of domestic and municipal waste water of the Israeli communities is far larger than that of the Palestinian communities.

<sup>2</sup> Almost all the areas, in which such plants or dumps could be built remain until now under complete Israeli occupation – Area C, since it is impossible to erect a dumping site downtown in the crowded Areas A that were under formal Palestinian civil and security autonomy, at least until the large IDF incursions last year.

development projects shows that Israeli authorities and/or their policies obstruct, delay and often even prevent the implementation of projects.

- This was the case even before the Intifadha. An example: Obtaining a license for a German well-drilling project in the Eastern aquifer took almost three years (from 1995 to 1998), due to the heavy bureaucracy and the lack of good-will to promote such projects. Suitable well locations were not accepted by the Israeli partner in the Joint Water Committee (JWC), sometimes even openly reasoning that this location was already earmarked for drilling a new settlement well (which is of course strictly illegal according to International Law). And even after having changed the location under application several times and after having obtained approval from the Joint Water Committee (that is from the Israeli side in the in the JWC) it took another year until the responsible representatives from the Civil Administration were willing to sign this license.
- The above attitude is present also in the case of wastewater projects, and it was the delay of these projects that was especially deplored during the symposium. Another example: The treatment plant for Salfit, another German project, was applied for and approved by the JWC. Very costly site and construction plans had already been carried out when, suddenly, the Israeli side withdrew its approval and forced the whole project to restart from scratch at another location, because the nearby settlement was keen on expanding (again; illegally expanding) in the direction of this site.
- It is mentioned in the report of FoEME, but was not stressed in the symposium that Israel for years tried to force Palestinians and donors alike to invest heavily in treatment plants to serve the nearby illegal Jewish settlements. Approval of these projects was made conditional on extending their service to the settlers, which of course was firmly rejected both by the donor community and the Palestinians. The consequence was obstruction, blockage and completely unnecessary delay for all projects involved.
- Since the outbreak of the Intifadha, or rather since the start of collective punishment of the entire Palestinian population for the armed and terror attacks of Palestinian groups, field work has become nearly impossible for any Palestinian, due to a network of more than 160 checkpoints and even more flying checkpoints of the IDF. Interrupted only for very brief periods, throughout the year 2003, Ramallah had no street exit for normal workers by car. (The one checkpoint that has remained open is Qalandiyah. Only a small minority of Palestinians with special permits can cross it. "Open" in this case means waiting long hours daily, only to pass this first checkpoint. Implementation of all projects is made almost impossible by this policy. And many donors seriously consider postponing their projects until free movement inside the West Bank is guaranteed.
- This very grave situation has particular repercussions on the pollution by solid waste. For the past two years the wild dump fill in wadis exposed to the aquifer recharge is advancing at an unprecedented pace. Truckloads of waste from the villages are dumped into open spaces, on slopes and into wadis, places that were never used for waste disposal in the past before the implementation of the IDF policy of total closure inside the West Bank. The sole reason for this change of behavior on the Palestinian side is the presence of a vast number of unmanned obstacles like earth mounds, cement blocks, trenches etc. disconnecting Palestinian villages from each other – villages, it should be stressed, that have no connection whatsoever to any Jewish settlement or Israel proper. Waste trucks simply don't reach their destination any more. And drivers who dare to remove these obstacles in order to fulfill their mission are shot at, arrested, their ID's torn, their trucks damaged, confiscated or even destroyed by the IDF. Any village council in the West Bank can testify to such cases. It should be noted of course, that this policy of "travel" restrictions is applied to the small de-central waste water trucks, to drinking water supply tanks and actually to any Palestinian vehicle. It should be also stressed that, in the vast majority of cases, no security requirements can account for these obstructions.
- Even the donors themselves suffer from this policy: To give one example: In 2002, it took the USAID more than 3 months of intensive coordination to be able to access the site of a drilled, but yet undeveloped, well just to carry out tests and install some equipment.

4.

The above list is far from exhaustive. But it might suffice to illustrate that the symposium was turning the actual situation upside down. It is very farfetched to imply that donors lack the will, energy or dedication to speedily implement their projects. No donor is interested in delays that only add costs.

5.

As for the claim that Palestinians fail to give priority to waste water projects as opposed to drinking water projects, it should be noted that this accusation completely disregards the extremely heavy lot of the Palestinian population with regard to access to sufficient and suitable drinking water supply (not to mention water for irrigation) – a basic human right. Until now, and after 35 years of occupation in Area C (28 years in Area A), Palestinians lack even the minimum supply, recommended by the WHO – 100 l/d/c. The average consumption is 60 l/d/c throughout the West Bank, but for example the largest city of the West Bank, Hebron, regularly has a summer low of 25 l/d/c in average. Translated into practical terms, this average means that the higher sites in the city don't have even a drop of water coming out from their taps for several months every summer. Any of the participants at the symposium should consider for a moment, which priorities he or she would set to drinking water if such a situation would be reality in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem or Haifa. It should however be noted that the official authorities in Palestine, the Water Authority, Ministries of Environment, Local Government etc. do not draw the conclusion that they don't want to implement waste water and solid waste projects. High priority is given to this sector from the base level and NGO's up to the highest level of policy makers, such as the heads of Palestinian Ministries, Authorities and Water Utilities as well as the members of the National Water Council.

It can therefore be summarized that there is a strong will for environmental protection on all sides, the Palestinian, the donor and the Israeli side. The problems have to be solved fast and they can be solved. However, the policies of the various Israeli authorities, especially in Area C is the prime practical obstacle and delay factor for all related Palestinian projects - besides insufficiencies, shortcomings and mistakes, but surely not lack of good will that might occur on both, the Palestinian and the donor's side. It is clear that also the Israeli population is a victim to the increasing pollution of the Mountain aquifer. However, as was shown above, this is at least partly an outcome of the Israeli policies in the occupied Palestinian territories and not just the fault of the Palestinians alone.

The recurrent accusations during the symposium are therefore not only extremely unfair and incorrect – but more importantly, they constitute a very unfortunate missed opportunity during such an important meeting. They point in the wrong direction and are not helpful in solving the burning issues but rather create a new obstacle against what could be a fruitful and trustful cooperation between all sides.

This open letter intends to promote cooperation from all sides, practical cooperation for the benefit of this most important shared resource. It was expected that this symposium would leave the mutual accusations and blame behind in order to exchange ideas and promote new solutions in an open and creative atmosphere. This opportunity was missed. It is late but not too late. The lesson to be learned from this meeting is that the difficult political situation should be taken into account in a much more sensitive and fair manner if we want to come back to the real issue: The protection of the Mountain Aquifer.

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