

...And a river runs through it

Rand Corporation's recent study on the top 10 international security developments has warned of a high-stakes Indo-Pakistan dispute over water. **Sunday Times** takes an in-depth look at the waters of conflict

By Ronojoy Sen

What does a paper presented by a Pakistani brigadier in 1990 and the Rand Corporation's recent study on the top 10 international security developments have in common? The centrality of the Indus waters in future conflicts between India and Pakistan.

Back in 1990, Pervez Musharraf, then a brigadier on a one-year training programme at the Royal College of Defence Studies, wrote a research paper on the arms race in the Indian subcontinent. His thesis: the Indus waters issue contains the potential of future conflict. More than a decade later, Rand analysts have warned of a high-stakes Indo-Pakistan dispute over water, an issue on which the two nations had managed to cooperate for years. They caution, "If it is not resolved, it could become a serious new source of conflict."

That the Indus waters are not merely of academic concern is illustrated by the ongoing controversy over the Baglihar Dam on the Chenab. Pakistan has claimed the dam will affect irrigation waters for wheat farming in the Punjab and has termed it a gross violation of the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty. According to an article in *The Dawn*, "The construction of Baglihar dam will not only deprive Pakistan of 321,000 acre feet of water during the three months of rabi season and will have far reaching consequences on agriculture, as well." Islamabad has even asked the World Bank, which brokered the 1960 treaty, to intervene. The Wullar barrage on the Jhelum is yet another unresolved dispute between the two countries.

A new study of India-Pakistan relations by the International Centre for Peace Initiatives presents a bleak scenario regarding water in Pakistan. According to the study, Pakistan's per



Illustration: AN

capita water availability has been declining at a staggering rate. Water availability is expected to touch the threshold level of 1,000 cubic metres in the next few years. Not only is the

groundwater table depleting, but due to heavy siltation of the Indus, the water storage capacity is declining rapidly.

Sindh is one of the worst affected

provinces in Pakistan. About 75% of Sindh's groundwater resources are brackish and about 88% of agricultural land is affected by salinity and waterlogging.

In addition, Sindh's share in irrigation water has been cut by over 25% between 2000-05. One of the reasons for the cut is the diversion of water to the Punjab, where the army top brass, including Musharraf,

own vast tracts of land. This has led to widespread resentment and protests in Sindh.

Of course, the situation is not much better in northern India with Punjab and Haryana locked in a bitter dispute over irrigation water. The Rand survey

Sticky issues

■ **Baglihar Dam:** Pakistan contends that if India builds the 450MW Baglihar Dam on the Chenab, it would be violating the Indus Waters Treaty. The issue figured in talks between the PMs of both countries last November. Islamabad is seeking the intervention of the World Bank, which brokered the Indus Treaty.

■ **Wullar Barrage:** There is an ongoing dispute over the construction of Wullar Barrage or the Tulbul Navigation Project on the River Jhelum in Jammu and Kashmir, which India began building in 1984. India stopped construction three years later after Pakistan objected to the project on grounds of obstruction of the water flow to Pakistan.

says, "Aquifers are being depleted, water tables are falling, waterways are severely polluted, and soils are becoming acutely saline from the over-use of underground water supplies. Yet both countries must not only maintain a supply of food and potable water for their populations but also develop the hydroelectric potential of the river system that runs through the borderlands."

Though the Indus Treaty has held up remarkably well, in December 2001, following the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament, New Delhi discussed the possibility of revoking the treaty. The Indian Cabinet Committee on Security identified the cutting of water supply as a threat to use against Pakistan. But better sense prevailed and the idea was put in the cold storage. That the proposal came up for discussion gives credence to the Rand survey's assessment: "Allowed to fester, the dispute over the Indus Water Treaty could fundamentally transform the Kashmir conflict, already one of the major threats to regional stability."

However, not everybody buys this argument. Sumit Ganguly, professor of political science at the Indiana University and an authority on India-Pakistan relations, says, "The water scarcity in Pakistan has little or nothing to do with the Kashmir dispute. Pakistan staked its claim on Kashmir as early as October 1947! At that time, I am quite certain that the nascent Kashmiri state had any clue about water resources. More to the point, it would have sought to link the two issues at the time of the Indus Waters Treaty was signed. Finally, even during the 1965 and 1971 wars it did not raise the water issue at all and nor for that matter during Kargil."

But recent statements from Pakistan confirm that the Indus waters have become a major concern. In March 2003, prime minister of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir Sikandar Hayat went to the extent of suggesting at a seminar that the "freedom fighters of Kashmir are in reality fighting for Pakistan's water security."

It is no surprise then that analysts, including the CIA, see water as the most contested natural resource in South Asia.

Unless mandarins in New Delhi and Islamabad put their heads together to sort out the Indus water-sharing, the issue might well come back to haunt them.

River Rules



■ Indus Waters Treaty was signed in 1960.

■ The Indus River Basin was divided with Pakistan having effective control of the three western rivers — Indus, Jhelum and Chenab — and India having control over the three eastern rivers — Ravi, Sutlej and Beas. The division provided Pakistan with **56%** of the Indus catchment area and India with **31%**

■ India is obliged to let flow the waters of the western rivers to Pakistan — India can only use the waters for household and agricultural purposes.

■ The new areas developed by withdrawals from river flows in India cannot exceed **120,00 hectares**.

■ There is a restriction of **3.6 million acre feet (MAF)** on storage capacity in the western rivers.

Source: International Centre for Peace Initiatives

DEEP FOCUS