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FEATURES

Central Asian Leaders Fail To Overcome Differences At Water Summit



Kazakh children play on an abandoned ship in the dry bed of the Aral Sea.

April 28, 2009 By Antoine Blua

A rare Central Asia summit of the five founding members of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea revealed some common ground on that issue -- but nevertheless ended in bitter disagreement.

Meeting in the southeastern Kazakh city of Almaty for a one-day summit, the presidents of all five Central Asian states failed to overcome differences over water use.

Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiy exposed the real bone of contention among the states during his address -- energy shortages, the construction of new hydropower stations, and concerns by downstream states as to how their water supplies will be affected.

"The strategic issue that requires resolution is the coordination of our timetables of water release for irrigation and energy needs and compensatory fuel supplies [to Kyrgyzstan], and this is what should be the subject of international cooperation among parties interested in using water-saving technologies," Bakiy said.

The comments by Bakiy, whose "upstream" country is looking at hydropower as an answer to its energy needs, triggered an angry reaction from a "downstream" counterpart, Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

"It was agreed that the only issue to be discussed at the current summit and the expanded summit would be the activities of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea and its main tasks in the future," Karimov said.

Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, representing another country keen on taking advantage of its ample water resources to produce electricity, also refused to introduce the water issue into the talks and was apparently angered by other leaders' assertions that water-supplying countries were responsible for water shortages.

"I thought we agreed not to discuss hydroenergy issues," Rahmon said. "I proposed it and you and the other colleagues agreed. And now there's a whole discussion being started. I also have something to say about it."

Upstream vs. Downstream

The summit's host, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev, later produced a statement focusing only on the decline of the Aral Sea. The document was signed by all five Central Asian leaders, including Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov of Turkmenistan.

Noticeably absent from the summit was uninvited Russia, which in recent months has called on countries in the region to take the concerns of others into consideration when thinking about future hydropower projects.



Kyrgyzstan's Bakiy defended his country's hydropower plans.

The call was seen by Tajikistan as a sign that Moscow was siding with Uzbekistan in the most serious source of dispute -- and instability -- among upstream and downstream countries in Central Asia.

Rivers that originate from mountainous Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan irrigate lands in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan before flowing into the Aral Sea.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which suffer most during cold winters and have little hydrocarbon resources, have long been pursuing the construction of hydropower projects.

"At a time when natural energy resources are scarce, in order to ensure a stable supply of energy resources to our population, especially in the cold winter period, our country now has to place a special emphasis on the development of the hydroelectric industry," Kyrgyz leader Bakiy said.

The region's most populous country, Uzbekistan, fiercely opposes such projects, saying the construction of the hydropower stations would reduce the flow of water on its territory.

Saving The Aral

On a positive note, Nazarbaev announced that that Kazakhstan was not going to wind up the planned Aral Sea-saving efforts, despite the global economic crisis.

The Aral, located between Kazakhstan to the north and Uzbekistan to the south, was once the world's fourth-largest inland body of water.

But the sea has dramatically shrunk in recent decades due in large measure to the diversion of its feeder rivers for irrigation, causing ecological and social disasters.

Its water levels have fallen to the point that the sea split into two separate bodies of water -- the Northern and the Southern Aral Seas.

As part of the first phase of the project to replenish the northern part, a 13-kilometer dike was opened in 2005. As a result, the Northern Aral Sea's surface area is now more than 40 percent larger than it was at its lowest point.

Nazarbaev said the second stage, involving constructing another dike to raise the water levels, would start in the near future.

Optimists say that within a few years the sea could again be lapping at the shores of the former port of Aral, which now stands 35 kilometers from the shore, bringing environmental recovery and new economic opportunities.

But regional cooperation and water management in all five Central Asian states remains of vital importance to the regeneration project.

RFE/RL's Kazakh Service contributed to this report

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Aral In Trouble



Photographer Radek Skrivaneck spent two years on a project to highlight "the demise of the Aral Sea." These are some of the images from his "Aral Tengizi -- Story of a Dying Sea" exhibition. [click here](#)

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