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A Province Is Dying of Thirst, and Cries Robbery

By ERIK ECKHOLM

GHARO, Pakistan, March 13 — Millions of people in southeastern Pakistan are seething with anger and despair — and not over the American threat to attack Iraq, the plight of fellow Muslims in Kashmir or the political role of the mullahs.

The life-and-death matter that has provoked hundreds of irate demonstrations in Sind Province in the last three years is water. More precisely, what farmers and politicians alike here charge is that "water robbery" has been committed by Punjab, the more powerful Pakistani province upstream.

"Punjab isn't giving us the water we are owed and our lives are being destroyed," said Muhammad Usman, a 40-year-old father of 10, who has received enough water this year to plant only one of his 50 acres. To keep his family alive he has opened a tea hut along the roadside, where he earns less than a dollar a day. "Of course we are angry at Punjab," he said.

Mr. Usman is especially disconsolate this month because, in a fit of optimism, he paid \$60 to plow a second acre in hopes of doubling his meager wheat crop. "I spent a lot of time and money on this plot but there just wasn't enough water," he said, crumbling the overturned earth in his hands.

With only inches of rainfall in the best of years and its underground waters saline, Sind would be a barren desert except for irrigation drawn from the Indus — a prodigious river that over the millenniums has supported grand, water-worshipping civilizations.



For lack of water, Muhammad Usman, a Pakistani farmer, could plant only one of his 50 acres

But after decades of dam and canal construction upstream, topped by several consecutive years of drought, the oversubscribed river carries no fresh water at all in its last 80 miles, instead offering a ribbon of useless salt water surging up from the Arabian Sea.

Millions of villagers are falling deeper into poverty as empty canals prevent them from planting crops, and even drinking water becomes scarce. At the same time, the lush valleys lining the banks of the Indus, which have supported large settlements mixing cattle husbandry and crops, are turning to ghost landscapes.

The river's broad, fertile delta is suffering ecological catastrophe. By official estimates, 1.2 million acres of farmland have been covered by the advancing sea while large additional areas are turning to salty desert. Biologically vital mangrove swamps are dying.

Since Pakistan split from India in 1947, the two countries have constantly argued about the division of the Indus and its tributaries. To the people of Sind, though, the main villain comes from within — the Punjabis, who tend to dominate the country's military and government bureaus. The provincial water war is a prime example of the ethnic and regional fissures that weaken Pakistan, beyond the better-known clashes over Islamic fundamentalism and central control over defiant northwestern tribes.

In the Sindhi view, a series of internal agreements were imposed by outsiders and now those are being violated, too, as Punjab takes more than its legal share through the current years of drought.

Federal irrigation and power authorities deny the charges and insist they are fairly balancing national needs and the burdens of low rainfall. It is difficult for an outsider to sort through the decades-long tangle of accords and monthly canal allotments and judge the merits of competing legal claims, though the consequences in Sind are visible enough.

Pakistan would face a water crunch in any case because of its surge in population, from about 30 million when the country was founded in 1947, to 145 million today. Sind alone grew from 6 million to 40 million, bolstered by the arrival of huge numbers of immigrants from other ethnic groups in Karachi and other urban areas. That has left the region's cities a different political universe from the Sindhi-dominated rural areas.

An outcry from Sind and environmental groups appears to have stopped a proposal to build a third giant dam on the Indus, which could save more water and produce more power but worsen the ecological damage. Adding to current Sindhi outrage, though, is the government's support for yet another canal upstream, the Greater Thal, which will open up 1.5 million acres of Punjabi desert to farming at a time when Sindhi farmlands are famished.

"The Punjabi ruling classes just want Sind to be an appendage of Punjab," said Rasul Bux Palijo, the founder of Awami Tahreek, a Sindhi-based party with a significant following.

"Now they have stopped the water in a hundred different ways and they've turned Sind into a desert."

Leaders like Mr. Palijo know it is unrealistic to call for outright Sindhi secession (though the red flags of a repressed Sindhi secessionist movement are visible in small towns). Still, he and others draw ominous comparisons to 1971, when the disaffected Bengali people of East Pakistan broke away to form Bangladesh.

"At least the British were more impartial when they ruled this region," Mr. Palijo said. "I think the people of Sind will have nothing to do with Pakistan if this problem isn't solved."

The sense of a common enemy has united — on this issue at least — the owners of giant estates and the lowliest sharecroppers. "Punjab is flouting all our agreements," charged Qamar Zaman Shah, president of the Sind Chamber of Agriculture, which represents large landowners. "The shortages are not being shared equally."

Mr. Shah, speaking in his large, modern house in the city of Thatta, said that in recent years he had been able to plant only one-third of his holdings and had to spend a lot on diesel fuel to pump water up to the fields.

The devastation is more visible in the village of Muhammad Khan Jat, near the river's mouth, where even the crudely built tea shops have been abandoned, a school building sits empty because the government teacher never showed up and villagers are fleeing for the cities.

"People here are living a miserable life now," said Muhammad Juman, who looks older than his 50 years. "We can hardly scrape together a pound of flour to survive."

"Just give us water and all our problems will be solved," he said.