

Iraq's wetland wildlife threatened by low water levels due to mismanagement, Turkey

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Dozens of water buffalo in Iraq's southeastern wetlands have died because of low water levels in the marshes, threatening the livelihoods of a community of marsh dwellers that has made the area its home for millennia.

Water levels in the marshes have fallen a third from their peak at 1.30 metres. Just as important, water salinity has nearly doubled, said Raad Habib, head of the Chibayish Organization for Environmental Tourism.

The development is just the latest blow to a part of the country that has suffered decades of misfortune and neglect.

Saddam Hussein accused the Marsh Arabs of treachery during the 1980-1988 war with Iran and later drained the marshes to flush out rebels. Many residents fled, but after his overthrow in 2003, some of the marshland was reclaimed.

More than 30 water buffalo have died in the past month and many more are threatened with disease as the water level falls, according to Iraqi environmentalists and health officials who have launched a vaccination campaign.

Iraq's marsh Arabs live amid a flat landscape of water and grasses near the border with Iran.

The inhabitants use wooden pirogues with outboard motors to navigate waterways that stretch from horizon to horizon and their way of life and distance from Iraq's cities have kept them on the fringes of society.

The lack of water is in part caused by the low priority given to agriculture by the central government and decades of mismanagement of water resources. Corruption and climate change also play a role. For many, the impact has been devastating.

The area is thought to be the site of the biblical Garden of Eden and UNESCO named it a world heritage site in 2016.

Iraq is also surprised by Turkey's decision to start holding back water behind its Ilisu dam earlier than promised, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said on Tuesday, suggesting it was done to win support for the government in upcoming elections.

Turkey has started filling the dam basin, a step that has alarmed neighbouring Iraq, which is struggling with a water crisis.

"The Turkish prime minister had promised me they would start filling the dam at the end of June, not the start, so I was surprised to see they started," Abadi told a news conference.

"I am aware that they have elections on June 24 and perhaps need to get the support of farmers," he added, referring to Turkey's planned general elections for president and parliament.

Turkey's ambassador in Baghdad said Ankara is cooperating.

"We will not take any step without consultation with the neighbouring country on how we can cooperate and provide support during any problem, Fatih Yildiz told a news conference through an Arabic translator.

A spokesman for Turkey's Ministry of Forest and Water Management spokesman said Turkey was "partially" filling the dam's basin.

Around 70 percent of Iraq's water resources flow from neighbouring countries, especially in the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. Both flow through Turkey.

Abadi was at lengths on Tuesday to show his outgoing government was doing

everything it can to tackle the issue.

"There are plans to secure our water resources on both the domestic and foreign fronts. Yes, there is a water shortage this year, but it is not a crisis," he said.

The government has plans to provide water to farmers, Abadi said, especially for Iraq's strategic wheat crop. At the same time, it might reduce plots of land reserved for planting other crops that consume a lot of water.

Iraqi media suggested Baghdad had asked Ankara to delay holding back water because of its own election, which took place on May 12. Abadi's bloc came third, but he may yet secure a second term if he gathers support from the winning groups.

The dam issue was not the only point of contention between Baghdad and Ankara on Tuesday. Abadi demanded Turkey respect Iraq's sovereignty in its approach to Kurdish forces.

Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu had said on Monday that Turkish forces were waiting for the right time to carry out an operation in northern Iraq's Qandil region where high-ranking members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) are located.

Soylu had said that "Qandil is not a distant target" anymore. Abadi countered that the Turks had been "talking about that for over 35 years" and again suggested the statement was an attempt to score points before the Turkish elections.

"We will not accept any violations of Iraq's sovereignty," he said, adding there was no military coordination with Turkey on this issue.