

NATURAL RESOURCES AS COVERED BY THE TAJIKISTANI MEDIA

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As a rule, the Tajikistani media remembers the natural resources issue twice a year: in the fall, for fear of no heating; and in the spring, for fear of no water. For some reason, topics related to other natural resources are seldom reported.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s the “independent” media wrote much about Tajikistan’s abundant natural resources. Their articles painted a picture of the fairytale riches (water, electricity, oil, coal, uranium, gold, cotton, etc.) flowing from the republic, and that if the republic were to withdraw from the USSR they would guarantee a fairly well-to-do lifestyle for the country’s people. Time has put everything in its place, and it turns out that developing these resources requires a colossal investment now unavailable in the republic.

The Tajik media now mention natural resources twice a year depending on the season; they speak about electricity shortages deficit in the winter and about water shortages in summer, while remaining silent on the rest. The journalists aren’t very inventive and their pattern is always the same; will there be gas and electricity in winter? If the answer is “yes”, then the question is “for how long?” And if the answer is “no”, then the question is “why not?” Statistics are always cited to show the estimated reserves and project capacities of the operating water power stations - with a bit of exasperation thrown in that these capacities and reserves do not prevent systematic interrup-

tions in the electricity and water supplies. Reports then usually end with a list of the persistent debtors and defaulters, such as the Aluminum Production Plant, Tajik Railroad and others.

Juma Kuddus of *Vecherny Dushanbe* (No.11, March 15, 2002) tried to deviate from this stereotype in his article entitled, “If we are so rich, why are we so poor?” The article starts with concrete examples of individuals talking about their poverty. The author believes this poverty is due to electricity shortages. «The Rasht Valley region, which is rich with minerals, industrious people, fertile land, and is a largest center of apiculture, is now in trouble because of the electricity shortages.» However, the author then forgets his heroes and dwells on the customary historical excuses and once again tells the oft-told history of the construction of the Rogun water power station, and the reasons why it has still not been completed.

A SOURCE OF CONFLICT

The alternative topic to electricity in the newspapers is “will there be a drought this summer, and how much water is there in Tajikistan’s mountains?”

Asia-Plus (No.1, 3-9 January,

2002) reprinted an article by Andrey Grozin - “Is the Spade War Coming?” - first published in *Continent* (Kazakhstan). According to the article, the unresolved problems of land and water use have already triggered clashes between Tajik and Kyrgyz villages. The “ketmen (spade) scuffles” in 1969 and 1974 are cited. During «the interethnic water-related conflict in 1989, ten people were killed and 48 injured.» The author reproaches Tajikistan for its mismanagement and incompetence in utilizing energy resources. «The capacity of Tajik rivers and lakes is over 64 million kilowatt-hours of electricity!» he writes. «Meanwhile Dushanbe is thus far contriving to squander its water potential. Moreover, with this colossal capacity Tajikistan energy facilities only satisfy 50% of the need - the country has to import power from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.» The exacerbation of interstate and interethnic water-related tensions amongst Central Asian countries are predicted in “Land, water and water use: triggering interethnic conflict” by Negmatullo Mirsaidov in *Varorud* newspaper (in *Khujant*) of March 27, 2002. However, unlike the *Continent* correspondent, Mirsaidov does not believe that the republic is squandering its water resources by supplying Syrdarya water on a mutually beneficial basis to neighboring Uzbekistani farms instead of selling it. «Tajikistan is today giving its neighbors lessons on peaceful

international cooperation,» he writes.

Vecherny Dushanbe of March 15 published a report by the Khovar News Agency's O.Sobolev in his column "Water is worth more than gold". The report notes the scientific studies on water resources undertaken by the Tajik Academy of Sciences: «Scientists have by now examined the ways in which glaciers "operate" in the east Pamir mountains; and studies are continuing on how to use water resources in industry, agricultural irrigation, and communal facilities. Many geothermal and mineral sources have been found, and recommendations have been made for their practical use.»

SILENC ON URANIUM

Uranium is another natural resource in Tajikistan, yet customarily disregarded by the press. Journalists with a long record of service say an information bulletin belonging to the National Agency of Independent Tajikistan (NAIT) was closed following its publication on the strategic fuel. In 1994, the newly established agency decided that the first issue of its bulletin should contain a sensational item, and published some data on the republic's uranium mines. There was no follow-up - the second

issue did not appear.

There was a sort of discussion in Vecherny Dushanbe on the issue, triggered by a letter from Tajikistan Airlines worker, Aleksandr Boiko. In the December 21, 2001 edition, he proposed that atomic power stations rather than water power stations could resolve the power supply issue, and cited reasons why atomic stations should be built in Tajikistan. He believed that the republic has all the things necessary for such a project: «site: Yavan Valley; raw material: domestic uranium, and another Chernobyl tragedy is unlikely to happen.»

Another Dushanbe citizen and engineer, R.Yuriev, responded to this proposal and listed the reasons why atomic stations should not be built: Tajikistan lies in an area prone to earthquakes; and the geopolitical situation of the region creates certain risks due to its military and political instability.

Meanwhile, reports have appeared in newspapers on people detained for trading uranium. For example, a report entitled "Two kilos of uranium stolen in Chkalovsk" was published in Asia-Plus this March. A criminal group engaged in trading crude uranium had been detained, according to the report, and two kilograms of uranium had been confiscated. The group were accused of steal-

ing radioactive elements over a period of four years.

LACK OF EXPERTISE

So why don't Tajik journalists write interesting and competent articles about Tajikistan's natural resources? The deputy editor-in-chief of Asia-Plus, Marat Mamadshoev, believes, «journalists lack the expertise to write about this issue. That is probably why they treat it as uninteresting.»

«Sometimes they speak and write enthusiastically about the resources available in Tajikistan: minerals, water, power, etc. Well, we are rich for raw materials - and that's all. But we'll probably have to wait half a century until these raw materials are utilized. The republican media are therefore making the effort to attract foreign investment,» believes Oleg Sobolev of the Khovar News Agency. According to him, the republic has experts who know the price of Tajikistan's domestic natural resources but they do not expound on these themes because they are well aware of the current financial opportunities. Meanwhile, journalists lack the expertise to write good articles on these themes, and their publications have no effect and entail no changes. «Editorial offices should have a competent journalist or expert in this area, who would monitor the related events rather than writing mistakes.»