



Water as a Strategic Tool in Central Asia

Hannah Smith

Central Asia is often cited as the region that will host the world's first war over water [1]. Arid climates together with environmental mismanagement and climate change have resulted in water in this area becoming increasingly scarce. Already weak states that are marred by ethnic tensions among them, now vie for this diminishing resource. The Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) holds most of Central Asia's water in its mountain glaciers. However, Kyrgyzstan's coveted position as the bearer of water is not necessarily enviable due to neighbouring politically fragile states, including Uzbekistan with whom relations have been especially fraught, staking their claim. Water – its scarcity and location – coupled with tyrannical leadership and poor interstate relations is a catalyst for regional level conflict.

Tensions around water accessibility also create pressures at a local level, often impacting the region's most vulnerable communities. This paper looks at the village of Barak, drawing on fieldwork undertaken during an internship with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, for a joint agency research project carried out alongside the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which was co-managed by the author. The research report produced is in the process of being published by the United Nations [2].

Barak is a victim of ethnic disputes, political tensions and of its geography. The village is a Kyrgyz exclave: though regarded as Kyrgyz sovereign territory it sits completely encircled in another state (in this case, within the borders of Uzbekistan) [3]. Disjointed from the Kyrgyz 'mainland' its 750 residents are subject to strict border restrictions and suffer a lack of both human and material resources. This hampers their most basic efforts to proceed with sustainable development and to secure the rights granted to them in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [4] and the Kyrgyz Republic's constitution [5].

Barak is situated close to the major Kyrgyz city of Osh in the Ferghana Valley, a region of Central Asia where Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan meet. The region is notorious for violent ethnic clashes. Relations between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks remain fragile and consequently the predominantly ethnic Kyrgyz residents of Barak often face hostility when crossing the border which is manned by Uzbek border guards [6]. As with any community, Barak's need for water is irrefutable but the bizarre geographical and unfortunate political situation mean that Barak's residents are especially vulnerable. This complete reliance on accessing external resources makes Barak the perfect playground for Central Asian leaders, and even individuals at the local level, to use

water as a strategic tool. The impact on the community is profound.

Irrigation

Fieldwork in the area uncovered that border restrictions prevent residents from transporting a wide range of foodstuffs in and out of Barak via Uzbekistan. Furthermore, due to poor agricultural conditions and a lack of knowledge only two crops are grown in the village (for the purpose of being sold – the only source of income), therefore a secure supply of irrigation water is crucial.

The head of Barak village explained that “there are lots of obstacles connected with irrigation”. Irrigation water for Barak is sourced in Kyrgyzstan, from a river in the city of Osh. It then flows through 2.5 kilometres of Uzbek territory before reaching Barak. Regulating the usage and availability of this water is particularly difficult.

Both the head of the village and an NGO representative interviewed claimed that the Uzbeks regularly block the irrigation water entering Barak. Blockages are particularly frequent during seasons when water for crops is especially needed, such as the cotton season. This can be disruptive to the cotton yield, one of the two crops grown in Barak, and has negative economic impacts for Barak's residents. On average regional authorities need to be contacted around three times per week for water supplies to be reconnected.

The use of water as a political tool in Central Asia is again evident when the village head notes that Kyrgyz authorities may press for re-connection through warning that they are able to retaliate by blocking other water channels travelling to Uzbekistan via the Kyrgyz Republic. Water here is critical in the battle for power and political influence. Furthermore, the cycle is self-reinforcing; increased regional-level tensions result in more frequent blocks to water supplies and an increase in reconnection time. The village head summarized the crucial role water plays in Central Asia with the observation that “Instead of being the head of people, better to be the head of water”. Control of water in Central Asia is power.

For Barak's residents a secure irrigation source is vital for both their food security and their livelihoods. Unreliable supply of water for irrigation hinders crop production leading to a decreased crop yield and ultimately less to be sold. Border restrictions which prevent residents seeking alternative supplies and hampering their own ability to move render the people of Barak extremely vulnerable to politically motivated decisions to block this vital resource.

Drinking Water

Safe, reliable and sustainable drinking water supplies are another critical issue for people living in Barak. Water comes from a deep groundwater well and is piped to the village. The piping often freezes in Kyrgyzstan's cold winters and with no electricity in the village, it is difficult to thaw.

Frozen pipes equates to no drinking water and strict border restrictions dictate that non-residents are not permitted to travel to Barak and that residents cannot collect water in nearby Uzbek villages, leaving Barak effectively stranded without this vital resource. Freezing of pipes in this manner can also cause cracks and ruptures allowing potentially dangerous bacteria to enter the system [7]. Bacteria of this nature are commonly found in groundwater supplies meaning that monitoring and often water treatment are necessary to prevent illness [8]. With infrequent testing there is a threat that water-borne illnesses could develop in the village.

Water here is one factor in a larger political conflict between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, which initially caused the extraordinary border controls to come into place and maintains the lack of political will to soften them. This political situation and the resulting lack of safe drinking water, presents a clear violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 25 and Article 16 of the Kyrgyz Constitution.

Conclusion

The situation in Barak illustrates how when water is sparse, its supply can be manipulated strategically. Such water scarcity combined with the historical disputes and ethnic animosities in Central Asia play out locally to terrible consequence in communities, violating basic principles of Human Rights. Although the international community does not predict the escalation of the current situation in Central Asia into a 'war over water', the case of Barak underscores the micro level effects occurring when water is used strategically. The international community must act if we are to ensure that safe water remains accessible to all and independent of political struggles.

International development agencies, including the UNFAO and UNDP, are actively working towards better water access in Central Asia. UNFAO has run a number of irrigation training programmes bringing together conflicting ethnic parties who all use the same resource with the aim of lessening conflict through education on resource management. The cross-border nature of the problem in Barak makes it an especially difficult case to tackle.

References

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About the Author

Hannah completed her MA in Asia Pacific Policy Studies at The University of British Columbia, Vancouver. As part of her studies she completed an internship at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Her research focuses on the intersection of security and development issues across the Asia-Pacific and she held a Fellowship at UBC's Institute of Asian Research in that regard. Hannah now works in renewable energy policy in Scotland, working with stakeholders to improve the policy landscape for offshore renewable energy development.