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Water is cornerstone of development declares King Hussein while opening Jordan's National Water Symposium

By Ian Kellas
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AMMAN, March 20 — The National Water Plan, which was presented and discussed yesterday at the opening session of the current water symposium, raises some important political questions for the country.

In his opening speech on Sunday, His Majesty King Hussein described water as "the driving energy of life ... the cornerstone of development".

In Jordan it is a scarce resource and its exploitation and allocation is obviously closely connected with the nation's economic and social aims.

"It appears", the paper on the master plan concludes "that Jordan's water resources are sufficient to satisfy the water demand expected to result from the implementation of the present development plans".

The paper was presented yesterday by Dr. H.R. Frantz a member of the German consulting team which helped in the 18-month preparation of the master plan. It gives a figure of over 12,000 million cubic metres (MCM) as the extent of exploitable ground water resources stored in aquifers throughout the country. Annual surface water resources are calculated at about 880 MCM.

Resources can meet rising demands

Demand for water is thought likely to rise steeply. The total use at present is 451 MCM. In 1985 this figure rises to 920 MCM and for the year 2000 demand is tentatively fixed at 1,100.

Nevertheless "the projected long term demand could be covered by annual resources", if these are fully exploited, the paper continues.

An obvious problem however is that the water is not where it is wanted. Nearly half the population of the country for example lives in the Amman region, where only six per cent of the total water resources are to be found.

And there are other problems, some of which were discussed in a paper presented today to the 45 foreign delegates and their 150 Jordanian counterparts by the Preparatory Committee for the National Water Symposium. These include water loss into the Dead Sea or into the atmosphere, previous development of water resources, resulting now in water pollution, and the laxness of present legislation covering water control.

One prime need is for coordination. Water development cannot be slotted in to social and

economic plans until there are more complete regional plans for the whole country. His Highness Crown Prince Hassan, who chaired the meeting, revealed that the Ministry of the Interior might in future play a greater role in coordinating development in the regions.

The question of priorities

Above all there seemed to be agreement that there was a need for a central water authority, that would have the power to lay down the pecking order among Jordanian institutions for access to water.

One of the main questions is the amount of water that should be left to agriculture. Irrigation accounts for by far the biggest proportion of water consumption in the country. At 405 MCM a year at present irrigation drinks up nearly ten times more water than domestic and industrial supplies together. Plans presented at the symposium envisage that irrigation, especially of course in the Jordan Valley, will be allowed to take increasing amounts of water until about 1985. Around that time, supplies for irrigation will have to be restricted even at the expense of further agricultural development.

A paper read this morning which lays out a water strategy for the north of Jordan (including Amman) suggests that the King Talal Dam should be turned over increasingly to supplying the needs of Amman. Jordan Valley irrigation schemes would have to be supplied in effect from the Yarmouk River further north.

The general feeling from the papers appeared to be that because water savings in domestic and industrial use are difficult to achieve on a large scale, the irrigation programme would ultimately be made to take the squeeze. Dr. Munther Haddadin Vice President of the Jordan Valley Authority, was understandably unenthusiastic about this conclusion and questioned whether it would not be wiser to "drain the people of

Amman down to the Valley instead of draining water from the King Talal Dam to Amman".

All this is to beg the question of whether water from the King Talal Dam is suitable for domestic purposes anyway. A special appendix on this subject is attached to another national paper dealing with the current status of water pollution in Jordan. It concludes that although there is cause for concern about the dam, "experience shows in many parts of the world that the use of impounded water (like the water at King Talal Dam) is possible provided" the necessary precautions are taken.

Questions of pollution have been given an airing at the symposium, with the general conclusion that closer attention will have to be paid to this in future. Schemes for recycling have also been discussed over the past couple of days.

The rows of blue plastic bottles of mineral water lining the delegates' desks at the Palace of Culture are a reminder that every water problem can be solved given enough money. As yet there has been little indication of the financial scale of Jordan's water development projects. Dr. Frantz explained to the Jordan Times that this was outside the scope of the master plan.

In any case there is nothing sacrosanct about the plan. All were agreed that it needed constant up-dating and while speaking of Jordan's "commitment to the plan as a document", the Crown Prince laid special emphasis on the need for flexibility.

The symposium continues until Wednesday.