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Written statement* submitted by Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaidjanais-Iran - « ARC », a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Water Quality Disaster at Araz River with Alarming Carcinogenic Diseases

This statement by Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaïdjanais-Iran - « ARC » focuses on the water quality status of the river Araz (or Araxes) draining through four countries. Therefore, it is a transboundary basin, rising in Türkiye and flowing through the borders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran before it reaches the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan. Being the artery of a transboundary basin, one expects that it is regulated by iterative planning and decision-making processes towards determining the quantity, quality, and timing of water between the respective States. We are unable to find its transboundary basin management plan, hence assume that it does not exist. Those for some of the rivers in Armenia fail to be downloaded.

Subsequently, there is no collective quantitative information on the following:

- Water quantity distributed in aquifers and surface waters including lakes and reservoirs.
- Water quality status for inventories of organic/non-organic pollutants/nutrients, hazardous substances and hydro-morphological alterations.
- No risk register for the basin.

Any transboundary system without a management plan is highly vulnerable to arbitrary treatments. Therefore, the statement is focused on the at-risk population in the southern sub-basins in Azerbaijani provinces (West/East Azerbaijan and Ardabil) the Islamic Republic of Iran, where their population in the middle and lower reaches of the river is interacting with highly polluted waters. The statement draws information from environmental activists, and news media published in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Environmental and the Triggering Pollutions

1. Armenia: A series of Armenian mines and the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant act as hazards and are likely to expose the river Araz to risks from their effluents, where the plant is dilapidated and was built by the Soviets in the 1970s. It is in a high-risk earthquake zone and lacks a secondary containment chamber, similar to the infamous Chernobyl Power Plant.
2. The Islamic Republic of Iran: Numerous mines in the Islamic Republic of Iran act as hazards and are likely to expose the River Araz to risks from their polluted discharges, all within Azerbaijani provinces. These mines are normally contracted out by the Islamic Republic of Iran to foreign contractors and their standard of regulation is suspect.

Direct encroachments onto the river include three large embankments (in Nakhjivan-Arablar (Poldasht), Khudaferin and Mughan). No detailed information is available on the fauna/flora of the river but still, 10 edible fish species survive. The at-risk population includes residents of villages and cities on the Araz southern bank (provinces of West/East Azerbaijan, Ardabil). These middle-stream and downstream reaches of the river are at the receiving end of pollution loads, particularly around the embankments, used for drinking, agriculture, animal husbandry and poultry and aquatic farming in Mughan Plain.

Although Azerbaijan and Türkiye are not known to trigger water quality incidents to impact the River Araz basin, there is a collective insensitivity towards a disaster that is rolling out.

Sources of Effluents Discharged to the River Araz

It is not rare to see that the evidence base is unclear on the pollution of the middle and lower reaches of the River Araz concerning the actual polluters. A generic account of the sources are:

- Governmental sources in the Islamic Republic of Iran
- Mining industries in the Islamic Republic of Iran
- Mining industry in Armenia
- The Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant in Armenia discharging water contaminated with uranium concentration.

Mining Effluents from the Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of two major sources for discharging effluents to the River Araz from gold and copper mines of Qara Dagh (Arasbaran), including the Sungun Copper Mine and the Andarian Gold Mine, whose effluents contain a large amount of lead, mercury and cyanide. These effluent discharges disregard the health of the people on the banks of the River Araz and its tributaries, and fail to provide safe drinking water to the residents. There is an intriguing aspect of the Sungun Copper Mines, as its tailing dam is in the River Ahar basin with reportedly little contamination from the mining activities, but its actual contaminated effluents are believed to be drained directly by the Ilkhina River to the River Araz.

Effluents from Armenia

Contaminated effluent discharges from mines in Armenia to the River Araz do not abate, the alarms for which have been raised by numerous eyewitness accounts of the activists, and recently by Iranian officials. Consider some cases from the officials in the Islamic Republic of Iran:

- An article in Payamema presents the outcome of their review of 11 research findings carried out in 2020-2022 by well-established research organizations. It confirms that a large proportion of contaminants in the River Araz are from Armenia, including radioactive uranium concentrations.
- In 2015, Hamid Ghasemi (Director General, Department of Environment, East Azerbaijan), stated to IRNA news that Armenia discharged effluent to the River Araz violating environmental regulations and international protocols and conventions. Also “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should protest strongly. The Ministry of Energy should also act immediately according to the standards and criteria of the country for the protection of the environment”.
- Jamaran website reported that “the effluent of the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant in Armenia flows into the River Araz and according to the Vice President of Health of Ardabil University of Medical Sciences Ardabil province hold the first place in the country in terms of people suffering from gastrointestinal cancer, but its population is in the 22nd place in the whole country”. (The statement by: M.A. Meshghini (representative of Ardabil province; member of National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, Islamic Council)
- Journal of Border Studies reported: “Cases are escalating on severe oesophagal, stomach and skin cancers and liver diseases caused by water pollution in the River Araz, the border regions inhabited by Azerbaijanis.

- Journal of Border Studies reported that there are five copper and molybdenum mines in the north and east of the border town of "Agarak" in Armenia, 5 km from the River Araz, which are sources for millions of cubic meters of toxic effluent to the river every year, and subsequently, the concentration of chemical pollutants and heavy metals increase in the Araz.

Disinformation and Misinformation

Although various Iranian Research Centers have identified Armenia to be the source for disposing effluent contaminants into the River Araz, the Iranian officials are dismissive and act obstructively towards disseminating the appropriate information. Consider Mehran Khojste, stating: "radioactivity of the water in the River Araz has not been observed to exceed the permissible limit". He (head of groups for regional water companies, Department of Environment and Water Quality) claimed that his group ran a monitoring program together with the Atomic Energy Organization of the country but produced no evidence to justify his claim. Notably, this is the normal tactic in Iranian media to depressurize hot issues without producing evidence.

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Impacts

- "Ardebil province has the highest rate of stomach cancer in the country (50 cases every year per 100,000 people), stated by Reza Malekzadeh, Deputy Director of Research and Technology of the Ministry of Health). This is almost three times that of Tehran (18 cases per 100,000).
- Payamema states that: "Water in the River Araz is contaminated with radioactive materials, as well as with contaminated heavy metals such as lead and its compounds, arsenic, aluminium compounds, nickel, copper, iron, manganese and 53 other pollutants.

Concluding

The Azerbaijani at-risk population in the middle and lower reaches of the southern bank of the river Araz is a victim of the indifference of the Iranian authorities to an ecological disaster fermented by the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Armenia. Yet, Iranian authorities stay silent on all issues spreading disinformation and misinformation over the region. The victims are millions of riparian Azerbaijanis living along a margin interacting with the polluted water. They are subjected to living in a high-risk environment, and this must stop soon by direct calls from the United Nations to the States of Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Türkiye. They need to formulate a transboundary basin management plan and stop being insensitive to the plight of millions of at-risk Azerbaijanis along the Southern banks of the river Araz.

The river corridor and its sub-basins should now be considered a disaster zone, and only the second in magnitude to Lake Urmia in Azerbaijani provinces in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The at-risk population is using contaminated water without knowing the inherent and untold health risks. This must be actioned immediately by an emergency plan even before formulating a transboundary basin management plan. The true impact on fauna/flora or the level of stress in ecological and environmental spheres is unknown. It is not impossible to envisage a major conflict zone created by ecological disasters in the near future.

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