

'The Impact of Large-scale Dam Construction on Regional Security in the Kurdish Regions of Turkey' **Speech Delivered by the Kurdish Human Rights Project at the Alternative Water Forum, İstanbul, 21 March 2009**

I am speaking today, in place of Rachel Bernu of KHRP, who was unfortunately unable to be here and sends her apologies and best wishes to all participants. The Kurdish Human Rights Project works to promote and protect the human rights of all peoples within the Kurdish regions, through advocacy, litigation, monitoring, capacity-building and public awareness. We have been working for close to 10 years as part of a coalition with many other contributors to this Forum, to prevent the construction of the Ilisu Dam in southeast Turkey.

The emergence of hydro-politics in international debate is not new, but increasingly, water - and the conflict it inspires - is becoming a feature in discussions about world security. As far back as 1985 former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali was predicting the centrality of water in future Middle East conflicts and urging the need for international agreements on how water should be managed, and yet today, the disparity between those making the decisions and those living with the consequences seems wider than ever. Why has it been necessary, at this, the 5th World Water Forum in 12 years, for civil society groups and international NGOs to form their own meetings in order for stakeholders to have a voice, while on the other side of the city, heads of state continue to map out the future of the region without consultation?

Water, far more than oil, gas or minerals, has symbolic value; those who have water have power. In the case that we are discussing today, that symbolism is heightened by the fact that the water in question comes from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, ancient rivers that have provided irrigation for the people of the region long before state lines were drawn.

As I'm sure you are all aware, the South-eastern Anatolia Development project, better known by its Turkish Acronym GAP, is the biggest development project ever undertaken by Turkey, and one of the biggest of its kind in the world. KHRP believes that the main driving forces behind GAP are not economic or social development but rather are misguided beliefs of the security establishment in Turkey, that this project will weaken Kurdish identity in Turkey and will potentially allow for a military victory in the ongoing armed conflict in the Kurdish regions. Far from 'enhancing the level of welfare, peace and happiness of our citizens living in the region' as claimed in the



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action plan launched in May last year, this project in its current state will be detrimental and increase instability not only domestically, but in the region as a whole.

First conceived by the Turkish state in the 1950's the main push for the project came during the 1980s and in 1986, the Turkish government established the GAP as one of the main regional development programs in the country. From the very beginning, the project was perceived by the state as an all-encompassing solution to the problems of the Kurdish region, with either a breathtaking lack of awareness on the part of the government as to what the cause of those problems actually are or as an intentional smoke-screen to gain international support. Conflict in the region, international condemnation, a faltering economy and international financial backers dropping out one by one are just some of the reasons that this project has dragged on for over 35 years. However the GAP has seen a recent revival, with the government stating it as a top priority. So what has changed?

If you read through KHRP and Corner House reports on the Ilisu Dam and other GAP projects over the past 10 years, the answer is clear: not much and definitely not enough. The key issues of concern with the project, brought up time and again by local and international NGO's, still remain. There is still no meaningful consultation, no adequate resettlement plan, a questionable Environmental Impact Assessment and there are continuing cases of intimidation, harassment and illegal expropriation of land. The project breaches international law and standards on several counts. Since the inception of the project, its ideology and language have shifted from the abrupt aim to 'reinstatement of civilisation to the Upper Mesopotamia' with its implicit dismissal of any cultural significance of the ancient city of Hasankeyf, which will be flooded if this project takes place, to a more diplomatic and inclusive discourse, but the aim of the project is the same.

KHRP refers to the southeast of Turkey as the Kurdish region of Turkey, as it is historically and currently predominantly populated by Kurds dating as far back as the 12th century. The Kurdish region has suffered a long and drawn out conflict, decades of deliberate isolation and neglect, massive displacement of the population and some parts of which today are under state-of-emergency-like conditions, being marked 'high security zones'. The UK Defence Forum has noted that 'from the outset, the Southeast Anatolia project has had profound

security implications' and that 'it is no coincidence that the project is situated in the Kurdish region of Turkey'. One key so-called 'security benefit' from GAP will be that it will displace Kurds from their traditional mountain environment and into urban areas, where they can be culturally assimilated and where the government believes it can more easily keep an eye on them. This could sound far-fetched, but only to those who do not know the origins of this project or the history and ongoing repression of Kurdish identity in Turkey. As recently as 2007, AK party Sanliurfa Deputy Sabhattin Cevheri stated in a report on the region, 'As long as GAP remains unfinished, terrorism cannot be vanquished.'

From 2002, in order to keep this project afloat over the decades, Turkey has worn whichever hat is likely to fit at any given time, but the end goal has remained the same. When the economy was failing, the project was used to attract international investment. When it was in vogue, Turkey began to use the anti-terror defence to gain the support of the West. National and political security became equated with cultural homogeneity and economic development. In the view of the Turkish state this has meant that any opposition the Ilisu dam is a threat to the integrity of the State. More recently, the government is adapting to international trends once more, sensing the growing disquiet with the blanket 'anti-terror defence' given by many governments around the world and the recent moves in the US to once again strengthen the dialogue on the compatibility of freedom expression, including freedom of dissent, and has re-cast the GAP as an essentially humanitarian project, using such phrases as 'broadening freedom'. However, those who raise questions about the value or even legality of the Ilisu dam continue to be seen as criminals, and a threat to the State. As recently as December last year, Ipek Tasli from the Keep Hasankeyf Alive Initiative, was arrested, detained without access to a lawyer and then accused, along with her driver, of disseminating propaganda on behalf of a terrorist organization. All this was for attempting to investigate whether or not official efforts were being made to inform residents in the Ilisu area about the construction of the dam. And, as recently as this week, people who only implicitly questioned the state by simply unfurling a banner that read: 'No risky dams', at the World Water Forum were deported.

Indeed, the Ilisu Dam is not only a risky dam but also, and equally importantly, it is not the solution for the socio-economic problems of

the region it claims to be and will not guarantee lasting stability and peace. This has been repeatedly recognized by financiers who have pulled out of the project, by the World Bank who showed no interest in the project, and by countless amongst us over the last 10 years. The specific reasons for this have been discussed consistently in our reports on the region and have been touched on by other speakers at this forum. Briefly, if it were built, the dam would displace between 50-78,000 people, mainly Kurds; flood the ancient town of Hasankeyf and hundreds of other unexplored archaeological sites; severely impact the environment upstream and downstream of the dam; and severely reduce the flow of water to the downstream states of Iraq and Syria, with the potential for exacerbating conflict in the region. In addition, it is likely that the thousands of jobs created by the construction will go to migrant workers, not people in the area, and that the majority of the energy created will be used for the west of Turkey and for export.

Regarding the security question, slowly but surely, state actors are acknowledging that a military solution is not the answer to the conflict in Turkey, but that a comprehensive package of reforms including recognition of cultural identity and economic and social development is needed. And yet the construction of the Ilisu Dam would severely undermine all efforts that have been made that were heading in the right direction. No one who lives there, if they are aware of it at all, believes that the construction of the Dam is for their benefit, and they are correct in thinking so,

As my colleague Nick mentioned, not only is the project not compliant with Turkey's human rights obligations inside its own borders, it has also created a great deal of resentment from Iraq and Syria as well as other riparian states. Already one of the most unstable areas in the world, this tension threatens to flare up into a full-scale confrontation. The Export Credit involved in the project stipulated that Turkey must inform Iraq and Syria of the plans to construct the dam, but did not require them to negotiate or consult with these riparian states, a significant omission which meant that initially Turkey did not bother to do so. More recently, some negotiations and consultation has taken place, but still not in any meaningful way. Assurances that 'adequate' downstream flows will be maintained at all times are of no comfort to Syria or Iraq, who are strategically and materially placed at a disadvantage that they can ill afford. Turkey has openly used this control of the downstream flow as a threat against Syria for their

support of the Kurds, and is keen to destabilise any increase of Kurdish influence in the region, particularly in the Kurdish Regional Government area of Iraq. Control of water is an incredibly effective way to achieve this.

Turkey currently has many plates spinning in the air, and the confidence and ambition to keep them there. However if it continues to pursue a policy of conflict and military response, rather than replacing empty promises with development through true reform, then it will find itself in the centre of multiple conflicts with a lack of support. To use a much quoted phrase, 'we are all downstream' and it is incumbent upon states to support and protect all of their citizens and maintain good relations with their neighbours. It is clear that large-scale dams such as the proposed Ilisu Dam bring conflict, not peace, and Turkey should concentrate its energies on alternative measures that will bring long-term benefits to all, rather than cling onto this outmoded project in the face of logic and reason for the sake of a symbolic victory.