

Iraq builds 'Third River' project despite no-fly zone and embargo

by Marcia Merry

November marks the third month of the no-fly zone in southern Iraq, imposed this summer by the United States, and sanctioned by the U.N. Security Council, that dictates no Iraqi planes are permitted to fly south of the 31st parallel.

The rationalization given by the United States for this policy of "industrial apartheid" and depopulation, includes broad accusations against Iraq, involving specific falsehoods about the hydrology of the region. Efforts to improve southern Iraq drainage, the U.S. government claims, have been threatening inhabitants of the marshlands by hurting fisheries and harming the environment.

The charges against Iraq were detailed in a letter of July 30, from the special rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, addressed to the U.N. secretary general. In this document, no mention was made of the major hydrological problem aggravating the Iraqi marshlands, namely that Turkey has been holding back a large volume of the flow of the Euphrates River, by operation of the Kayban and Karakaya dams, and the filling of the huge reservoir behind the new Ataturk Dam.

As the U.S. State Department is in a position to know very well, the waterworks projects in southern Iraq, running south from Baghdad, through Basra to the Persian Gulf, have been thoroughly studied and worked on for over 40 years, and are as sound as advanced hydrological engineering science can make them. (See "Mideast Water Development: Making the Desert Bloom," an interview with Dr. Munther Haddadin, former head of the Jordan River Authority, *EIR*, June 19, 1992, pp. 7-12).

Moreover, the history of water projects in the region of southern Mesopotamia, goes back centuries to ancient times and the famed "hanging gardens" of Babylon.

In August, Iraq Minister for Foreign Affairs Muhammad Said Al-Sahhaf, submitted a document to the United Nations which reviewed the status of these water projects in the southern Tigris-Euphrates rivers region. The document, addressed to the secretary general, and intended for the Security Council, also protested and refuted U.S. charges that Iraq was violating the rights of people in southern Iraq, whom the U.S. called "Marsh Arabs."

Here we present excerpts from the recent Iraqi report. The map, which schematically shows segments of the Third River, was done by *EIR* based on maps from the U.S. State Department, and available in the Library of Congress.

Origin of the Third River project

What is called the Third River project is technically referred to as the Main Outfall Drain (MOD), designed to move saline agriculture runoff to sea, and to minimize its pollution of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Also shown on the map is the route of the Tigris Straight Channel, which was built to improve river drainage, but was abandoned after the change in Iraq-Iran borders after 1988. The background of the Third River is as follows.

"It is widely known that in the Tigris-Euphrates river basin, cultivation based on irrigation has been practiced for many centuries owing to the fact that rainfall is insufficient for agriculture. Because of continuous cultivation and the high salinity of the water of the Tigris and Euphrates, large quantities of salts accumulated on agricultural land and transformed it into land that is for the most part unfit for cultivation, particularly in the central and southern areas of Iraq.

"In order to restore the fertility of the soil and transform these areas into agriculturally productive land, it was necessary to devise a radical solution to the drainage problem. What is referred to as the Third River and is known in technical parlance as the Main Outfall Drain (MOD) project is the backbone of the solution to this problem.

"The idea of the project, which is one of long standing and began some 40 years ago, is to collect high-salinity drainage water from agricultural enterprises in central and southern Iraq into one main drain and to channel it into the Arabian Gulf [Persian Gulf] without intermixture with any of Iraq's rivers or marshlands.

"The issue of drainage in Iraq was first addressed in the framework of overall planning in the time of the monarchy by the American consultancy firm Tippet Appet Macarthy (TAMS) in 1952. In its report to the Development Council, it proposed that a number of main drains should be used, the

most important of them being the Main Drain (Third River) extending from Balad north of Baghdad to Nasiriyah, to collect most of the drainage water in the agricultural areas between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers into one main drain thence to be channeled into the Arabian Gulf.

"Then, in 1972, the British consultancy firm Sir M. MacDonald & Partners, in a study of the development of irrigation projects for the central Tigris basin, stressed the need for a part of the Main Drain (Third River) 154 kilometers long to be built between Hawr al-Dalmaj [in the north] and Nasiriyah as a requirement for improved irrigation on the enterprises in question. . . .

"Between 1972 and 1981, Soviet experts brought in by the Ministry of Irrigation conducted a number of studies and produced detailed designs relating to Iraq's overall drainage plan. A number of options were elaborated for linking the Main Drain at Nasiriyah with the Arabian Gulf. . . .

Where the project stands

"Work on the Main Drain (Third River) has gone through a number of phases. Two major conduits were built as part of the expansion of the great Musayyib irrigation project in 1954, and they form the basis for the Main Drain in light of the planning carried out by the American TAMS company. Then, in 1959, the 60-kilometer-long western Shatrah conduit was built by the Dutch company Zanen Verstoep NV to collect drainage water from the Ghiraf region project and channel it into Hawr al-Hammar. Subsequently, the 156-kilometer-long central section of the Main Drain was built between Hawr al-Dalmaj and the western Shatrah conduit by the Ministry of Irrigation and the Soviets between 1973 and 1977 on the basis of the designs prepared by the British consultants Sir M. MacDonald & Partners.

"After that, earthworks were completed for the southern section of the Main Drain between Nasiriyah and the Arabian Gulf by the German company Philip Holzman between 1982 and 1986 on the basis of the designs prepared by the Soviet consultants previously mentioned.

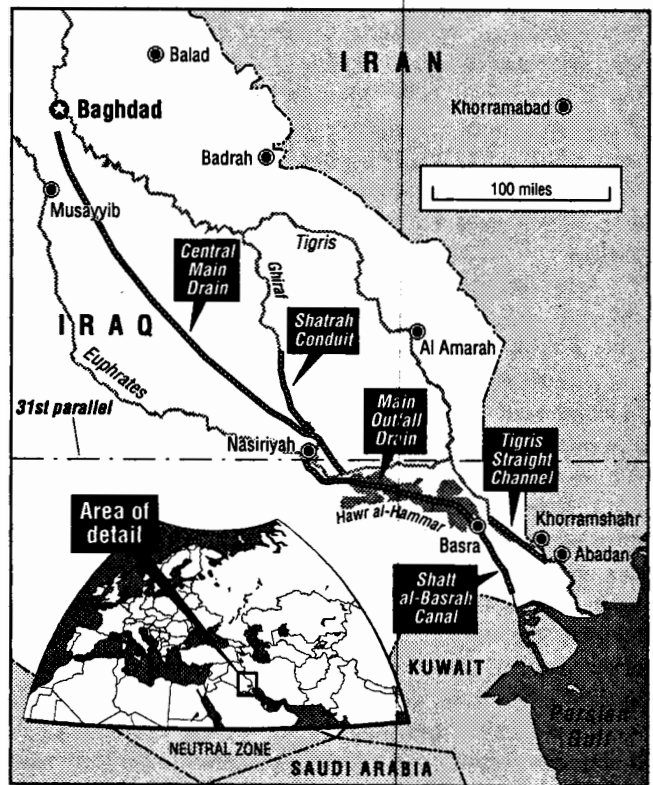
"Work on the installations and the main pumping stations was done by the Brazilian company Mendes Junior Co., which began work on 22 August 1984 and suspended operations without completing the work entrusted to it following the adoption of the embargo resolution in August 1990.

"Work on the project currently under way is confined to the completion of remaining tasks that were halted owing to the embargo resolutions and the suspension by foreign companies of their operations in Iraq. It is to be understood that most sections of the project were completed, and these sections are now being linked together with a view to completing the project.

Significant benefits

"The Main Drain (Third River) project is one of the most significant, major multipurpose agricultural projects in Iraq,

Selected sections of Iraq's 'Third River' route



given that it will have a whole set of economic, social and environmental benefits for the governorates of central and southern Iraq, namely Salah al-Din, Baghdad, Wasit, Babil, Dhi Qar, and Basra.

"The benefits are exemplified by the drainage of agricultural land, the lowering of the groundwater level, the restoration of fertility to the soil and the enhancement of productivity over an estimated area of 6 million Iraqi dunums or 1,500,000 hectares. It will also protect the high quality of water in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the marshlands and ensure its fitness for various municipal, industrial, and agricultural uses, since the channeling of drainage water into rivers and water-meadows leads to contamination and salinity.

"The project will also ensure the improvement and development of fisheries in the southern marshland area, which have deteriorated owing to the high level of salinity in the marshlands as a result of drainage water being channeled into them.

"Moreover, the project will be conducive to the stabilization of sand-dunes in the areas through which the Main Drain (Third River) runs and will halt the encroachment of desertification on agricultural enterprises in central and southern Iraq.

"The Main Drain can furthermore be used for purposes of inland navigation. It is this that has brought about the use

of the name, 'the Third River' for the Main Drain. . . .

The 'marsh dwellers' argument refuted

"The foregoing attested technical facts show the gross ignorance and dubious purpose of the special rapporteur's report as it relates to the Main Drain (Third River) project. The project does not specifically target the marshlands or their inhabitants. It is not a new project undertaken with a view to achieving the objectives stated by the special rapporteur, which have no basis in the objective reality of the project.

"The total length of the course taken by the project from its starting-point to its terminus in the Shatt al-Basrah Canal is 565 kilometers, while the section of the marshlands which runs parallel to the river, namely Hawr al-Hammar, is only 40 kilometers long. Hence it appears that the parties behind the special rapporteur's report do not want the small number of those raising water-buffalo and living in the marshlands in backward conditions to develop and become cultivators within a modern framework. They also do not want Iraq to rid itself of the saline water that is destroying its soil. They do not want it to regulate the utilization of its apportionment of water, a large part of which is being withheld in Turkish and Syrian territory in violation of international law.

"The parties that planned the report of the special rapporteur apparently want the Iraqi government to remain unable to provide for the food needs of its citizens, or a vital part of them, from inside Iraq, so that those who have the intention of maintaining the embargo may achieve their objectives at the expense of the security, stability, and sovereignty of Iraq.

"Do states or human rights organizations prevent countries from regulating their water, from building dams, from draining lakes, or from inundating parts of their territory with water that belongs to them?"

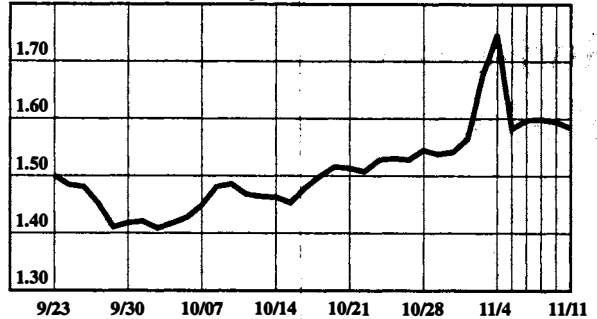
Turkey withholds Euphrates water

"With regard to the question of the paucity of water in the marshlands, this bears no relation whatever to the project. It is well known that the marshlands are for the most part fed by water from the Euphrates River and that the paucity of the water that has been noted has been caused by the great reduction of the water in the Euphrates resulting from the construction and operation of the Kayban and Karakaya dams in Turkey, the Tabqah Dam in Syria, and the project, begun in 1990, to fill the reservoir of the very large Ataturk Dam in Turkey. To prove this objective fact, it suffices to say that since it began to fill the Ataturk Dam, Turkey has imposed on both Syria and Iraq a water quota of 500 cubic meters per second instead of 900. Of this quota, 290 cubic meters per second are presently reaching Iraq instead of the previous 700 cubic meters. It is this that has brought about the paucity of water in the marshlands."

Currency Rates

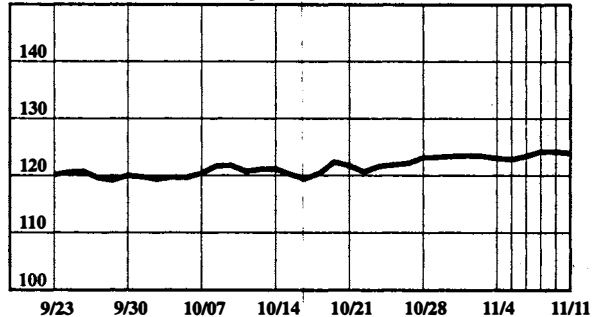
The dollar in deutschemarks

New York late afternoon fixing



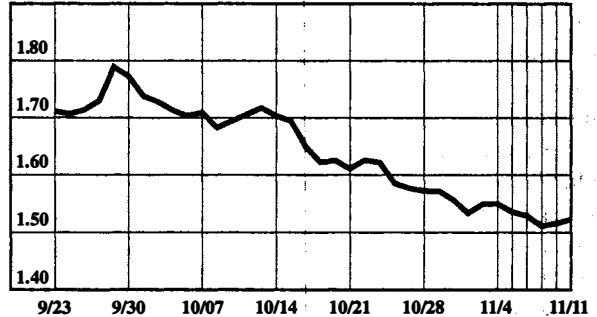
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing

