

Greater Thal Canal

By Mir Atta Muhammad Talpur

The Sindh Assembly passed a historic unanimous resolution on 28th February 2003 rejecting the Greater Thal Canal of Punjab and demanded stoppage of its ongoing construction work. Both treasury and opposition members jointly rejected the project. Members expressed fears that after construction of the Greater Thal Canal, there will be no water in the River Indus downstream the Kotri Barrage. According to members of the assembly, there is chronic shortage of water in the country and Sindh, being a downstream province bears most of the brunt. The House asked the Government of Sindh to contact the Federal Government, tell it that Sindh has serious objections over construction of the Greater Thal Canal and its construction should be stopped as it is the violation of the Article 155 of the Constitution. The House further recommended that the matter should be taken up in the Council of Common Interests (CCI).

Thal area relevant to the Greater Thal Canal is a rectangular shaped tract of desert lying between River Indus and River Jhelum, beginning from Chashma-Jhelum link Canal (connecting Chashma Barrage on the River Indus to the River Jhelum) to the Taunsa-Panjnad Link Canal (connecting Taunsa Barrage, located 150 km downstream of Chashma Barrage on the River Indus, to the part of Chenab River near Multan, about 100 km upstream the Panjnad headwork). The Greater Thal Canal will be third canal in the area just pointed out. One is Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal. The second is the Thal Canal, which commences from the Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal (Jinnah Barrage), runs parallel to the Indus River and irrigates areas of Bhakkar and Leiah. This canal exists since 1947 and has a capacity of 8500 cusecs. Others are its many small and large tributaries which almost reach the Taunsa-Panjnad Link Canal. The Greater Thal Canal is a separate and distinct entity commencing from RD 180 (located at the beginning of the distal third of the Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal at Adhi Kot. The construction work of this canal started on August 14, 2001, without approval of any competent authority. It will irrigate about 1.53 million acres of total desert area (culturable command area or CCA) in question which is 1.9 million acres (gross cultivable area or GCA). This is the barren land which Thal canal and its tributaries could not irrigate. The total area of benefit will be 1.55 million acres. Though it covers area of four districts, Bhakkar, Leiah, Khoshab and Jhang, its population is only 570,000, being sparsely populated. The main Greater Thal Canal will be 37 km long and with tributaries the branch canal length would be 372 km long. If we include the length of minors and distributaries, the length becomes 2013 km. In this way the total length of distribution system including all big and small water channels would be 2373 km. [Ⓢ] From main canal to its minors and smaller water channels, all will be concrete-lined to prevent water-logging and salinity. Beside buildings for accommodating operational staff, 823 regulators, bridges and other structures will be constructed. Though the project will be complete in seven years, the supply of water will start in fifth year. All this proves that the Greater Thal Canal will not

be merely a flood canal but a complete irrigational project with a perennial flow. The Punjab government has been stressing over ‘the need of the Greater Thal Canal’ at meetings of various forums but every time none of them approved it owing to its deleterious impact on Sindh. In spite of this, in 2001, the Greater Thal Canal project was commenced without prior approval of any competent authority or intimation to any stakeholder. Covertly, its speedy construction was started and according to reliable sources, a large portion of it has already been completed! The way the project has been started, the way it got ‘approved’ and the indifference shown to the cry of stakeholders; makes the intentions of the Punjab Government suspicious and dubious in the eyes of Sindhi people.

It is pity that such a huge project, the repercussions of which would affect other provinces as well, was started without prior approval of CDWP (Central Development Working Party), ECNEC (Executive Committee of the National Economic Council) or Indus River System Authority (IRSA). Later when ECNEC meeting was called for ceremonial ‘approval’, the Sindh Government was kept unaware of it! Without the participation of the biggest stakeholder the project was approved (long after its covert construction had started)! At this protests were lodged by Sindh Government officially as well as at public levels. Though the Sindh Government did lodge fourteen-point protest in the next ECNEC meeting, the project got approved by various authorities, after one-third of the project was already complete!

The meeting of CDWP, in which the Greater Thal Canal project was approved, was held on February 08, 2002. The Government of Sindh received the letter of invitation to participate in the meeting on February 11, 2002! Though it is claimed that letter was issued on February 04, 2002, but was it really mailed on the same day? It is strange that in the era of phone, fax and emails, an invitation of meeting was sent by ordinary mail. Even if the invitation had reached, say a day or two earlier, would it have been possible to prepare position paper at such a short notice? And if representative from Sindh could not participate, why wasn't the matter deferred for sometime so that Sindh could have presented its point of view at some later date? To study working paper of the meeting, to consider its legal and constitutional aspects, to consult experts on the subject and to formulate an opinion – all needed more time. Why it was not confirmed whether Sindh Government had received the invitation letter or not? ② And when Sindh Government lodged its complaint on February 26th, an emergency meeting was called on 28th February; again at an exceptionally short notice. And the project was got again approved without allowing Sindh to analyze the working paper threadbare and formulate its point of view! It is needless to say that it was not the democratically elected Sindh Government but the one installed by the military rulers themselves who hail from the province which will get most benefit of the project.

ECNEC cannot approve any project worth 15 million rupees and above without proper feasibility report. “But in this case the bill was cleared by the ECNEC without the preparation of a feasibility report for a project worth 35 billion rupees and without assessing its critical impact on the Indus delta”. ③

The contracts for construction of the Greater Thal Canal were given to the construction companies without preparing the PC-1. Covert, speedy construction, without taking

stakeholders into confidence only supplements to the ill-intentions of the godfathers of the project.

The Greater Thal Canal project is violation of the inter-provincial Water Accord of 1991. The said water accord is clear on two points: (1) New water reservoir or relevant project can be commenced only after assessing the confirmed availability of water and with prior permission of provinces and approval of IRSA; (2) in case of water shortages, the shortage will be borne by all provinces according to their allocations of water. At this time, neither excess water is available, nor has the permission of relevant authorities and stakeholders been taken. Therefore, when people of Sindh call the construction of the Greater Thal Canal as illegal and unjustified, it does carry a heavy weight. ^④

The organizations representing the Sindhi farming community have time and again pointed out that the construction of the Greater Thal Canal is a violation of the Water Accord – 1991 but the cry of Sindhi people have been completely ignored. These include organizations like Sindh Chamber of Agriculture (SCA), Sindh Abadgar Board (SAB) and Sindhu Agricultural Forum (SAF). Representatives of these organizations have contended on many occasions that there was no mention of the Greater Thal Scheme in the Water Accord-91. According to them Greater Thal Scheme was later incorporated into it as part of an unsigned Ten Dailies of Punjab which is a “fraud” and how can a fraud be endorsed. ^⑤

In light of the example of Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal (CJLC), the Punjab Government’s rationale that it will use its own share of irrigation water in the Greater Thal Canal doesn’t hold water. Since even in these days of water shortages in Sindh, Punjab is somehow carving out sufficient irrigation water from Sindh’s share to satisfy its needs, one cannot say for sure that more water will not be siphoned off the Sindh’s share after completion of the Greater Thal Canal project. When Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal was constructed, it was declared as flood canal, which would be opened only if and when in situations of high flood. An agreement was signed between the Chief Ministers of Sindh and Punjab that the Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal will only be opened in high floods and that too if the chief minister of Sindh permitted. But Punjab’s Irrigation Department has been running this link canal without permission of Sindh for a long time. How and why should then the Sindhis trust the assurances of Punjab? In the Greater Thal Canal project it has been mentioned that this canal will remain open for 6 months and a specified amount of water has been ‘allocated’ to it. Since this canal emerges from Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal, it is in contravention to the agreement of the Chief Ministers of Sindh and Punjab, *vide supra*.

The IRSA was recognized to be the authority to implement the water accord of 1991 and to regulate the water of the River Indus in accordance with the Water Accord. It was agreed that the IRSA will implement the agreed Water Accord and hence it is obligatory upon the IRSA to make decisions in accordance with the agreed accord. However, neither the Greater Thal Canal project was presented in the IRSA nor was its approval taken before the commencement of the construction work. It was only on the May 07, 2002 when this matter was presented to the IRSA and its approval was taken in a deceptive way based on fictitious availability of water in the Indus River system. If the IRSA cannot arrange 10 MAF (million acre feet) to flow downstream Kotri (mandatory,

according to Water Accord 1991, to prevent sea intrusion and to keep the Indus Delta alive), from where will it arrange water for the Greater Thal Canal? The Sindh government had also objected that WAPDA started work on the project without approval of the IRSA. It is mandatory for the Planning Commission, to seek opinion of the IRSA regarding project concerning irrigation, under a decision of the federal government, however, no such opinion was sought before the commencement of its construction work.

According to Pakistan WAPDA, the capacity of the Greater Thal Canal (also named Thal Flood Water Canal to give impression that it will be merely a floodwater canal), will be 8500 cusecs. Though named as 'flood water' canal, most of the water can only come out of Punjab's share of Indus waters, based on availability of 114.35 MAF. But the Greater Thal Canal was not mentioned in the original Water accord of 1991 and water is not available for such a project at the moment. Besides, this was later incorporated to the unsigned supplementary document with the assumed water availability of 117.35 MAF. The present water availability is 103 MAF and it has never crossed even 114.35 MAF figure since signing of the water accord. It is incomprehensible as to why US\$ 508 million are being spent on a canal just to catch flood water which hasn't been there for so many decades. Since water availability figures are imaginary, and such a quantity will never be available on regular basis, Punjab won't be able to supply water to this canal from its own share. Even if one assumes that flood flows may become available, a fat chance, the floodwater cannot be monopolized by Punjab alone. The benefits of floods should accrue to other provinces as well. If people of Sindh are 'suspicious' of the fishy designs of the Government of Punjab, such a 'suspicion' is based on facts, not assumptions. Obviously, it will be Sindh's share of water which will flow in the Greater Thal Canal.

In order to understand the deceitful methods adopted to legitimize the Greater Thal Canal, one needs to explore the matter in depths and details. In Water Accord 1991 only total water available in Kharif and Rabi seasons was mentioned and apportioned. It was not stated as to how much water each province would take in 1st, 2nd and last thirds of any month (Ten Dailies). In this way a loophole was left in the Water Accord to mould it and to interpret it in a particular way. According to clause 14 (a) of the 1991 Water Accord: "The system-wise allocation will be worked out separately, on ten daily basis and will be attached with this agreement as part and parcel of it." After signing of the accord, every province started demanding more share in the month of April. The month of April is critical for Sindh as most of the sowing of Kharif crops is done during this month. When the quantity of water demanded was calculated, it exceeded the quantity available in the system. In reality the Water Accord 1991 almost died in its infancy, but was somehow resuscitated to serve as a tool to dole out the interests of a particular province. It was decided to distribute the water according to average ten dailies use from 1977-78 to 1981-82. It was at this stage that the Punjab played a trick of including Greater Thal Canal's share in its 'ten-dailies'. Sindh objected this 'ten-dailies' distribution but the Council of Common Interest approved this 'ten-dailies' distribution as part of the so called 1991 Water Accord on September 14, 1991. At this stage the discharge capacity of the Greater Thal Canal at its head was mentioned as 5900 cusecs and the total water allocated to it was 1.87 MAF. WAPDA later increased its discharge capacity to 8500 cusecs and water allocation to 2.497 MAF.

How and why ISRA certified the availability of water for the Greater Thal Canal on May 07, 2002, eight months after the commencement of scheme, is an interesting story of the gimmickry of the tactful players of the game. The IRSA certified the availability of water for the Greater Thal Canal on the basis of yet another 'decision' of its own, dated February 20, 1998. On February 20, 1998, the IRSA had 'decided' that a quantity of 38.5 MAF was available (36.2 MAF in Kharif and 2.3 MAF in Rabi seasons) for the development of water resources in the country. If we add this figure of 38.5 MAF to the water availability 114.35 MAF, as mentioned in 1991 Water Accord, the total water available in the system becomes 152.85 MAF! This is absolutely impossible. Though the current availability of water is 103 MAF, it can never exceed beyond the average of 140 MAF. The inflated figure of 38.5 MAF included flood water as well as the water which would be available from new reservoirs to be built in the future. The IRSA 'believed' that according to the clauses 2, 3, and 4 of the Water Accord all provinces had a share in the water 'available' for the development of water resources (which, according to it, included the Greater Thal Canal) and, therefore, it recommended the availability of water for the Greater Thal Canal! This recommendation of the availability of the water was done according to the clause 8 (2) of the IRSA Act on the basis of clauses 2 and 4 of the Water Accord 1991. The IRSA's decision was not unanimous. There were three votes for and two against it. Sindh objected and the Federation shown a conditional assent.

On February 20, 1998 the IRSA approved the figure of 38.5 MAF water as 'available' in the Indus River system for further development of water resources in the country. Clearly, by doing so the IRSA acted as a tool of the Punjab, protecting and furthering its interests at a significant cost to the other provinces. In this particular meeting of the IRSA, Sindh was represented by Late Engr. Abdul Rasool Memon. He did not agree with this figure of 38.5 MAF and stressed for adoption of figures mentioned in 1991 Water Accord on which all provinces had agreed. As expected, his objection was rejected and the decision was approved with 4:1 majority. The IRSA decided this on the basis of River Indus water 'wasted' into the sea, downstream the Kotri Barrage, averagely per year between years 1976-77 and 1993-94. On the basis of this availability, the IRSA also 'approved' additional 0.624 MAF of water for the Greater Thal Canal. Though the IRSA certified the availability of water for the Greater Thal Canal, the recent figures of water flow downstream Kotri Barrage clearly shows that the decision of IRSA was absolutely incorrect and totally biased in favor of the bigger province. The exact figures of the water flowing downstream Kotri in the recent years are: 2000-2001: 0.739 MAF, 2001-2002: 1.924 MAF, and for the year 2002-2003: 2.142 MAF. Clearly this quantity of water is too short of the quantity required to keep the River Indus alive.

This decision of the IRSA (dated February 20, 1998) was not conveyed to the Sindh Government officially and the representative of Sindh, who had participated in the said meeting of the IRSA unfortunately later died. There was no proper representative government in Sindh as it was being ruled by the representatives of the prime Minister who hailed from the Punjab province or later, after the military coup, by the governor appointed by the military regime. Neither the puppet Sindh Governments were aware of this decision, nor did anyone of it had any interest to appeal against this decision in the Council of Common Interest (CCI) in accordance with the clause 8 (2) of the IRSA Act. According to this clause, if WAPDA or any province is not satisfied with any decision of the IRSA, it can appeal in the CCI.

According to a former Secretary of the Sindh Irrigation Department, Idrees Rajput, Sindh Government should appeal in the Council of Common Interest. According to him, the greater Thal Canal is also a violation of the article 155 of the constitution of Pakistan. According to this article of the constitution, if water interests of any province or FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) are affected by any governmental decision or law, the aggrieved party can lodge a written complaint with the CCI. Sindh government should first ask the Federal Government to revive the Council of Common Interest, which is not there since the military takeover of October 1999. Until CCI comes into the existence, a committee comprising technical and legal experts should be formed to examine all aspects of the issue and then take it up at appropriate level.⑥

The projects which favor Punjab are taken up hurriedly and secretly, even bypassing normal procedures, feasibility studies, approvals of competent authorities, whereas the projects or studies which may point to the injustices meted out to the Sindh are ignored, not taken up or delayed extraordinarily. Though the paragraph 7 of the Water Accord 1991 clearly mentions that a study will be carried out to assess the environmental impact of water diversions on Indus by the upper riparian and to assess mandatory supply of water downstream Kotri to keep the Indus delta alive, but so far no attempt has been made to initiate such a study. The Government fears that such a study will reveal higher requirements for the Indus downstream Kotri and hence may jeopardize anti-Sindh, non-sustainable Vision 2025 Plan! Instead of conducting an impartial study, large-scale propaganda is being carried out that large quantities of water is lost to the sea in waste. According to assessment of IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), Indus requires 27 MAF to prevent sea intrusion and to keep the Indus delta alive. Since the water accord of 1991, hardly a drop of water has been allowed to pass under the bridge of the Kotri Barrage. Already, according to the survey of the Revenue Department, due to non-availability of river water 1.2 million acres of fertile land has become unproductive in Thatta and Badin districts alone. This is the area which is almost equivalent to the area to be brought under cultivation by the Greater Thal Canal in the Punjab. The loss, in the monetary terms, exceed rupees one billion. In the 72 dehs, four hundred thousand acres of land has been completely destroyed and in other 87 dehs, five hundred thousand acres of land have been partially destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of people who lived and adorned the lively towns of Keti Bandar and Kharo Chharnu have migrated elsewhere in search of their livelihood. The process has not stopped. With every passing day more and more people are still parting the area!

Irrigation is provincial subject and its requirements should be met from provincial exchequer only. However in case of the Greater Thal Canal, all of the expenses (US\$508 according to initial estimates and given the length of project – 7 years – this amount is bound to increase to the tune of 80 to 100 percent) are being borne by the Federal Government, though the beneficiary is Punjab alone and that too at the cost of ruination of Sindh! On the other hand, the Super Highway, built by the Sindh Government from its own resources has been taken over by the Federal Government and its toll tax receipts are going to the Federal Government!

By rejecting the Greater Thal Canal project, the Sindh Assembly has rightly represented the view of the people of Sindh. Since the people of Sindh continue their protests against the Greater Thal Canal and water shortages, Members of Sindh Assembly, whether belonging to the Treasury Benches or Opposition benches cannot remain removed and

isolated. They had no option but to present the point of view of Sindhi people in their meeting.

When members of Sindh Assembly were discussing the Greater Thal Canal issue, the Chief Minister of the Punjab, Pervez Illahi, disclosed that Punjab wants to construct yet another water reservoir and that it will be decided within a year! According to him, the federal government is also ready in this regard and international donors are also willing to invest huge sums in such projects. Moreover, in a recent meeting of the IRSA, the representative of Punjab took up the matter of the Kalabagh Dam in the meeting though it was not on the agenda. This clearly points towards the fact that the Punjab and the Federal Governments are not ready to pay any heed to the protests of Sindhi people and to the unanimous resolution of Sindh Assembly and are adamant to go ahead with the Greater Thal Canal and Kalabagh Dam projects. The way the construction of the Greater Thal Canal was covertly commenced without prior approval of the relevant authorities or consultation of stakeholders, it is highly likely that soon the construction of such a dam will also be started.

In 1871 the British Government had rejected this project mainly because of the two reasons: (1) it would hit the vital interests of lower riparian (Sindh) and (2) the land brought under cultivation is barren waste with no hope of producing anything. Even today the project will benefit small number of people. The total population of the area extending over four districts is 570,000 out of which hardly 50,000 people work. It is unjustified to launch a project which will benefit a small number of people in Punjab but at the same time will deprive large number people in Sindh of their livelihood and historic right over the waters of River Indus.

It is highly likely that the land in the Thal area will be allocated to retired military and civil bureaucracy officials. Since the area is sparsely populated, new landowners will need to bring workforce from other areas which will change the demography of the region. [🔗](#)

This project was originally part of “Kalabagh Dam and Allied Scheme” in which Kalabagh dam would have provided stored water for distribution through Chashma-Jhelum Link Canal and the Greater Thal Canal. Since Kalabagh Dam is already under objection of Sindh, the construction of the Greater Thal Canal is like putting the cart before the horse. Spending huge sums on this project create suspicions that this might be the first stage towards construction of the unsustainable anti-Sindh Kalabagh Dam. It will not be out of place to mention here that this project was also permanently shelved in ECNEC meeting of August 19, 1975!

The greater Thal Canal is just a tip of the iceberg! The next project to be taken up is perhaps the Katchhi Canal, from Taunsa Barrage, to ‘irrigate’ the lands of Balochistan. The WAPDA’s Vision 2025 is very clear. It is a comprehensive plan to deprive Sindh of its Indus River water. Turning face from the ground realities can be harmful for the integrity of the country. Is it justified to make green, greener and dry, drier? Historically as well as legally, Sindh, being lower riparian, has greater and legitimate right over the waters of the River Indus and this right can neither be denied by cheatings and thuggery, nor by bullying or brute force. The message from the people of Sindh and their elected

representatives is loud, clear, and unambiguous. In one voice the people of Sindh are saying: Stop robbing Indus; no more tricks to siphon off our water!



- ① Water and Power Development Authority, Pakistan, Vision 2025,
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- ② Haider, Taj; G. Thal Canal, a canal for destruction, Daily Kawish, Hyderabad, Sindh, February 28, 2003
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