

AZOH: Two dozen environmental protesters have been arrested in Iran's East Azerbaijan Province in recent days, following demonstrations sparked by the failure of Iran's Parliament to adopt measures to stem the gradual drying and disappearance of Lake Urmia.

The Associated Press reported in April, "Environmentalists and activists have been raising alarms for years that the lake is threatened by drought and aggressive agriculture policies." If the lake's decay is related to government action, or inaction, it would parallel the erosion of another great salt lake, the Aral Sea, which suffered a similar fate during the last years of the Soviet Union.

Radio Zamaneh, an opposition station based in the Netherlands, reported on Sunday that the protesters in Tabriz were detained after 22 members of Iran's Parliament, the Majlis, "called for immediate action regarding the critical situation at Lake Orumieh, which is quickly becoming a salt field, a process that has been accelerated by the numerous dams built on the rivers that feed it. The government has so far confronted public outcry in the region by arresting activists."

The Azerbaijani Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported late last week that members of Iran's Parliament "recently voted against allocating funds to channel water from the Araz River to raise the level of the lake. Instead, they proposed relocating Azerbaijanis living around Lake Urmia." The broadcaster also reported that "several more activists were detained before and after a soccer match in Tabriz between the Azerbaijani Trakhtorsazi team and local team Shahr-dari Tabriz. Thousands of Azerbaijani fans chanted, 'Lake Urmia is dying, the Majlis orders its execution' during the match."

In an interview with Kaleme, an opposition news site, an adviser to Mir Hussein Moussavi, the leader of Iran's opposition Green movement, tied the government's heavy-handed response to protests about the lake to the disputed 2009 election. The adviser, Amir Arjomand, said: "A government facing a legitimacy crisis is fearful of everything, from the happiness of our youth to holding iftar in parks during the holy month of Ramadan. They even turn the drying of Lake Urmia into a matter of national security. He added:

They are neglecting their responsibilities mainly because they are indifferent towards the real challenges facing the people and out of touch with the specialists in this area. They actually believe that they can command the lake not to dry and if their command fails then there must be a conspiracy at work — and when people come to the streets with the intent to protect their environment, peacefully protesting against the neglect that has led to the destruction of a natural heritage, rather than protect the rights of their citizens, the government instead engages in the most heinous form of repression.

In a report on the disappearance of the lake last year, Iran's state-financed news channel Press TV suggested that global warming was to blame, not Iran's government. Press TV reported:

Experts have ruled out speculations that "red tide" might have caused Lake Orumieh to turn red, blaming the rare phenomenon on global warming. Lake Urmia, the second-largest saltwater lake on Earth, turned red as global warming accelerates the evaporation of the lake and gives a red tenor to water.

Declining rainfall, climate change and rising temperatures accelerate the evaporation process of the lake, which link to global concerns over the issue. Experts have warned that ecological factors, together with human activity, will eventually lead to the drying up of Lake Urmia.

The News York Times