

The protest actions have been held in Southern Azerbaijan demanding to prevent Lake Urmia's drying up since April, 2011. Seventy people were arrested during the April rallies.

The protests were developed in the letters to Iranian authorities and the parliament and turned into the street actions again on August 27.

A largest protest action was held on September 3. Police cracked down on the demonstrators in Southern Azerbaijan's cities of Urmia, Tabriz, Ardabil, as well as in the capital city of Tehran. Dozens of people were injured and arrested. Other sources reported that Iranian government tightened measures in the cities populated by Azerbaijanis and placed sniper posts on the roof of multi-storey buildings.

Iranian government reports about the arrest of 60 people during the last action.

Why Lake Urmia is drying up?

Lake Urmia is the largest salt lake in Iran. It is the largest lake in the Middle East, and the third largest salt lake on earth, with a surface area of approximately 5,200 km² (2,000 mile²), 140 km (87 miles) length, 55 km (34 miles) width, and 16 m (52 ft) depth.

The lake is named after the provincial capital city of Urmia, originally an ancient Turkic name meaning “city of water”. It was called Lake Rezaiyeh in the early 1930s after Reza Shah Pahlavi, but the lake was renamed “Urmia” in the late 1970s. Its ancient names were “Kabudan”, “Chichsit”. After the Iranian revolution, the names related to Shah were removed and the lake’s name was also “pardoned”.

Ajichay, Sofichay, Leylanchay, Ghalachay, Uskuchay, Tufarganchay, Derechay, Synykhchay are the basin rivers. Scientific sources showed that the level of water in the lake didn’t lower even during the periods of least rainfalls. Subterranean rivers falling into the lake prevented fall of water level.

Degree of salinity prevented the lake to become frozen in the winter. Lake Urmia has 102 islands with 33 640 ha of total area. Residents of the islands are engaging in agriculture, cattle–breeding, flower and garden planting and carpet–weaving. There are ports in the territory, which make it useful for the development of tourism.

The lake’s salts are considered to have medical effects, especially as a cure for rheumatism, kidney problems, disease of nervous system, skin diseases and etc. Lake Urmia has been a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and a Ramsar site since 1967.

Experts say drainage of Urmia has begun since 1999 with the construction of water storage reservoirs on the rivers falling into the lake under the slogan of “agricultural revolution”. The reservoirs prevented the river fall into the lake.

Local Azerbaijanis addressed the Iranian government many times concerning the water storages, but no results have been achieved. During the presidential elections in Iran in 2009, candidates Mir Hoseyn Musavi and Mehdi Karroubi also raised the Urmia’s problems.

Before the presidential elections in 2009, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that he established a state commission to address the Urmia's problems, but the commission has not been seen at work. Deputy president and the commission chairman Mohammadreza Rahimi promised to do best for solving the lake's problems.

Just after establishing the commission, representative of the Eastern Azerbaijan agricultural department Manuchehr Baghbani said that Urmia's drying up will be useful for them because it will create opportunities to breed camels in this region.

Iranian parliamentarians also had different opinions about the Urmia's problem during the parliament's August session, MP Muselreza Sarvati proposed to give money to the local residents that they can move to other places.

Some officials of the Eastern Azerbaijan province gave different statistics about the resources allocated for the prevention of Urmia's drying up.

MP from Tabriz Mohammadhoseyn Farhangi told local journalists that about 35 million dollars were allocated for the prevention of drying up.

Governor of Eastern Azerbaijan province Ahmad Alireza Beygi accused him of a lie and said 20 million dollars were allocated for saving Urmia Lake.

According to the South Azerbaijan's "Nasimi Garadagh" newspaper, the governor said that they need in one billion dollars to bring water from Araz River to the lake.

On August 16, Iranian parliament rejected the Urmia's revival project.

After the September 3 protest actions, which attracted the world's attention, head of the Iran's

environmental agency Mohammadjavad Mohammazadeh said the government allocated 900 million dollars to build water channels from the rivers of Araz and Silva to Lake Urmia.

Iranian deputy president for parliament issues Mohammadreza Mirtajeddini told journalists that the government holds serious discussions for solving this problem and this year 22 million dollars were allocated from the state budget for construction of water channels from Araz River to Urmia Lake.

Two Iranian officials showed fantastically different figures as the resources allocated by the government.

Assimilation policy

Indifference of the Iranian government toward the process of Urmia Lake's drying up aims to accelerate the process of movement of the population from Western Azerbaijan province, which center – the city of Urmia is located around the lake. The province is populated by Azerbaijanis and the lake is the main sources of their businesses. Urmia's drying up will break environmental balance in the area and at the same time will make the agricultural activities, cattle-breeding impossible. Local population will be forced to move to other provinces of Iran. It will prevent the Azerbaijani community to live here and will accelerate the assimilation process.

Tehran has pursued assimilation policy in this territory earlier too. The government of Iran reportedly settled ethnic Kurds in the Western Azerbaijan province. For example, after the 1979 revolution, the Western Azerbaijani villages of Soyugbulag and Badam were attacked by the Kurdish terrorists and defenseless peaceful population was forced to leave the territory. Later Kurdish people migrated from other countries were settled in the territories, which are located on the borders between South Azerbaijan and Turkey.

A few years ago MP Bahaaddin Adab from Sanandaj city said that Urmia is a “Kurdish city”. Member of Urmia municipality, ethnic Kurdish Khadija Mansuri also called it a “Kurdish city” and called the Azerbaijani Turks living there as the “guests”.

Pro-government newspaper “Jame-jam” placed the “Great Kurdistan” map on its website introducing the Southern Azerbaijani cities as the Kurdish cities. The protests of Azerbaijanis against all of these activities have not been taken into consideration.

Official population census conducted by the Iranian government in 2006 showed that Urmia, main city of the West Azerbaijan, has 580 000 population. Most of the city’s population are Azerbaijani Turks, little part of population are Kurds, Armenians and Assyrians.

Despite a number of appeals, Tehran has not stopped destruction of historic monuments and quarters in Urmia city.

Ancient Lutfali Khan Mosque in Urmia’s historic Gulustu quarter is on the verge of collapse. According to the reports, 4–5 years ago Sheikh Ali Khan Hamami (historic bath-house building) in Imam Khiyabany (Alley of Imam) street was removed under the pretext of construction of Sardaran Avenue. “Dogguz pille buzghanasi” (Deep-freeze of Nine Steps) in Urmia was renamed to “Yekhchele nohe-pille”.

Goshachay was renamed to Miyandoab, Soyugbulag to Mahabad. The town of Khana was renamed to Piranshehr, Suldur to Naghada, Gizil Khana to Khanegahe-Sorkh.

Recently the Iranian Culture Ministry’s website published a warning: “Working together with the authoritative organizations responsible for shop-windows, panels, packing of goods and etc., including municipality, police, Persian language and literature institutions, as well as registration authorities for the companies, we agree not to allow using non-Persian languages and we are working toward that”.

What has the morrow in store for Urmia?

An abusive anti-Turk article published by Tehran-based pro-government newspaper "Iran" in May, 2006 proved that the Islamic Republic is no different from Pahlavis for its moral, political, social and ideological views. Tehran's carelessness shows that the attitude towards local Azerbaijanis was hardened.

Experts say Tehran tries to calm the local Azerbaijanis with promises and implements different methods of punishment to make organizers of the protest actions avoid the process.

The main thesis of Iranian media and parliament now is "to resettle the people from the territory" due to expected "saline tsunami" as a result of disturbance of environmental balance. The protesters are arrested and persecuted as the "groups funded from abroad" or "separatists".

The protest actions of local Azerbaijanis once again reminded to the world community that there are 35 million Azerbaijani people in Iran. They reminded that these people were deprived of elementary human rights and the territory they live is on the verge of ecological disaster...

Wordless Turkey

Turkey's Middle East policy, intensive involvement in Palestinian affairs, aid campaign for Somali famine victims, support to Syrian opposition, fixing "Syrian tent camp" in Hatai, care about the Libyan ill

people are in the focus of world's attention, Gaza and Somali reports left behind the local news in Turkish media.

However Turkish media didn't cover the events in Southern Azerbaijan despite that Turkey's leading news agencies and televisions have their bureaus in Iran, which have all opportunities to broadcast live programs from Iran as they do it in Syria and Libya.

Azerbaijani mass media have a limited opportunity in this field. Iran introduced visa-free travel for Azerbaijan's population, but Azerbaijani journalists should have special visas to travel to Iran and should submit their visit program to the Iranian embassy in Baku in advance. Azerbaijani media organizations' request for opening their bureaus in Iran was rejected by the relevant organizations of this country. The people working with the Azerbaijani media, reporting or interviewing by phone or via e-mail are persecuted by the Iranian intelligence agencies. But this factor doesn't justify the Azerbaijani electronic and print media, which remains quite wordless in this process...

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