

Danger of drought

With a historic drought underway in neighbouring India, the fear that Pakistan will face a similar situation soon is very real. Hundreds of villages in India have been evacuated after temperatures in Delhi hit 48C. Up to 90 percent of those living in villages just 250 miles from India's commercial capital, Mumbai, have been left deserted as well, as hand pumps and tubewells have run dry. Three-fourths of the crops cultivated in Karnataka and Maharashtra have been hit by drought and crop failure. Officials say that the situation is worse than the 1972 famine that affected 25 million people in the state. Water tankers have been supplying water to villages to keep life going, but one must wonder for how long that can continue. It is estimated that 43 percent of India was experiencing drought by the end of May. There is no water left in 35 major dams while water levels are below 8 percent in 1,000 smaller dams. Groundwater, which provides 40 percent of India's water, is depleting so fast that 21 major cities in that country could run out of water by 2020.

Is what is happening across the border a scenario that Pakistan is moving headfirst into? There is little doubt that Pakistan too has been facing a water crisis for decades. Hydrologists claim that Pakistan's groundwater level is falling a meter every year due to extraction for drinking and for agriculture. Falling water tables is a situation that we need to avoid at all costs. Groundwater is the final defence in the face of any fall in rainfall, and long periods of drought. Instead, we have a situation where the groundwater we have is being polluted by untreated sewage. Pakistan is reported to have the world's fourth largest groundwater aquifer, which can be a permanent defence against drought, but instead the country contributes to nine percent of the global use of groundwater. This means that the Indus Basin aquifer is the second most 'overstressed' groundwater basis in the world.

Groundwater provides 60 percent of the water requirement in agriculture, 90 percent for drinking use and 100 percent in industry. What this essentially means is that Pakistan is estimated to be removing 10 bcm more groundwater than is being replenished each year. Much of the problem is down to poor irrigation management, where over 60 percent water is lost in the application process. There appears to be no framework or laws to deal with the extraction of groundwater in Pakistan, despite the fact that the National Water Policy 2018 committed to passing laws on the use of groundwater. In Pakistan, the signs of water stress are everywhere. Pakistan needs to act before we get to a position like that of India's, where entire villages have been evacuated to save them from drought.

Editorial