

Water shortages

THE Senate standing committee that was informed about water being ‘unutilised’ downstream of Kotri should disregard these words, and focus, instead, on getting Federal Minister for Water Resources Faisal Vawda to answer its summons. During a hearing, the standing committee on water was told by the Member Punjab of the Indus River System Authority, Rao Irshad Ali Khan, that water worth \$29bn flows downstream Kotri Barrage into the sea ‘unutilised’ every year. Mr Khan urged the construction of more dams for water storage so that this water could be utilised for irrigation purposes. His argument, as well as the calculation he presented, is entirely flawed and should be ignored. The more important observation during the hearing was made by the committee’s chair, when he noted that the water minister seemed to have plenty of time for making himself and his government appear absurd thanks to his controversial stunts on TV talk shows, but had no time to appear before parliament, which is his constitutionally mandated duty.

It must be emphasised again and again that dams are not the solution to Pakistan’s growing water challenges. Pakistan’s per capita availability of water is only slightly above 1,000 cubic metres per annum, which is considered the threshold below which a country can be defined as ‘water scarce’. Water withdrawals from the country’s river system and groundwater reservoirs are staggeringly high by any standards. The United Nations has estimated that 74pc of the country’s renewable water supply is withdrawn, whereas a value of 25pc is considered high stress. The same percentage in Iran is 67pc, India 40pc, Afghanistan 31pc and China 19.5pc. Clearly, Pakistan is squandering its water resources, and an increased amount of water withdrawal from the system will only aggravate the problem, not solve it. In December 2019, the World Meteorological Organisation noted that a new tool to estimate the likelihood of conflict due to water scarcity showed Pakistan to be at “significant risk” of experiencing water-related conflict in some parts within the next 12 months.

Time and again, those who have taken a close look at Pakistan’s water economy have said the problem is not lack of storage, but the wasteful utilisation of this precious resource. The existing irrigation system collects less than a quarter of its operation and maintenance cost from water charges (abiana), with the rest having to come from government resources. The lack of proper pricing is at the heart of the water economy’s dysfunction. But for water pricing to work, a proper system of measurement across the irrigation system down to the farm is required. The Senate committee ordered such a telemetry system to be installed. The Irsa bureaucracy needs to focus its attention on these solutions rather than constantly ask for more dams. And the senators should brush aside any demands for more water withdrawal infrastructure, and insist on sound measurements as a start.