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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaidjanais-Iran - «ARC», a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[9 August 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Statement: Lake Urmia at the Brink of A Catastrophic Demise

This Statement by ArcDH updates the 51st Session in relation to Lake Urmia, which is on the brink of a catastrophic demise. Yet it was a vibrant(1) source of ecology and the environment in the heart of Azerbaijan only 20 years ago. Every year, it needs at least 3 Billion Cubic Meters (BCM) of water to maintain its vibrancy. In the last 20 years, the Iranian government has effectively cut off this flow and so has been forcing 90% of the lake to dry up. Only since last year, the lake has shrunk by an additional 32%! If the Iranian government carries on with its past intriguing ways, Lake Urmia will disappear.

The Iranian government started damming the watercourses flowing to Lake Urmia after the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) using 'Jihad of Construction Iran' often without consultations, whose action plans "were drafted regardless of the principles of sustainable development(2)". The Statement outlines the legal framework and the roles of stakeholders on Lake Urmia comprising the at-risk population, governmental forces, and local and central governments. These are directed towards the attention of the international community to see the catastrophe of Lake Urmia in the light of the at-risk population.

Impacts

Cutting off flows from the Lake Urmia basin to the lake, detectable since 1995 (3), gave rise to serious impacts with untold risk exposures to its at-risk population, including:

- The 14 million Azerbaijanis at-risk population adjacent to the lake
- Possibly 10 million people outside these areas
- Flora, fauna (Artemia) on its wetlands and islands with migratory birds are no more
- Already, groundwater in the basin is undermined
- A saltpan of some 11 BCM with salt-storms impacting farms, pastures and the people
- The springs around the lake and its watercourses are completely dried up
- Animal husbandry and horticulture around the lake are being undermined
- Forty villages located in the east of the lake have been deserted, and these are increasing
- The hospitality and tourism sectors and thousands of jobs around the lake are destroyed
- Still there is no monitoring of impacts on human health!

Main Stakeholders in the Legal Framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The At-risk Population: Some 14 million Azerbaijanis form the at-risk population. Lake Urmia is substantive in the conscience of the Azerbaijani nation in Azerbaijani provinces in the Islamic Republic of Iran, who are wary of fixated governments with no motivation to revise their policies in the last 30 years. Thus, activists have mobilized their campaigns and triggered protests as follow:

- The First Campaign took off on the traditional Nature Day (4) (2 April 2010)
- Second Campaign - March-April 2011(5)
- Third Campaign - August 2011 (6)
- Fourth Campaign–May 2012 , (7)
- Fifth Campaign – April 2014 and the tactic of continuous protests at football grounds.
- Sixth Campaign – June 2017. (8)

- Seventh campaign – July 2022 (9)

During these campaigns, the protesters would take off from the capitals, Urmia and Tabriz and converge on the bridge over Lake Urmia. However, Iranian paramilitary units militarize the cities, arrest some 50 individuals on each occasion and block the roads. Altogether, up to 500 individuals have probably been arrested and many imprisoned. These protests have been reflected by international media with some focus on the at-risk population. The emerging opinion is that even if the Iranian authorities suppress the protests to save Lake Urmia, the militarization itself counts as their success in signifying their resolve.

In the latest protests on 16 July 2022, Iranian authorities militarized the cities and arrested at least 20 activists and 100s of warnings were issued to renowned activists of the grave consequences if joined the protests! In spite of this, protests succeeded in Urmia and marginally in Tabriz on 16 July 2022.

Security Forces and Local Governments: The at-risk population are also exposed to arbitrary forces inflicted by the police, military and paramilitary forces. Governors of Azerbaijani provinces and provincial Departments of Environment (DoE) use their forces in the service of the central government or serve as the scapegoat to take the blame for the central government.

Iranian Majlis: A bill by Azerbaijani Members of Majlis was rejected in 2011 by the Iranian Majlis on trans-catchment diversion of water from River Araz, known as Emergency Bill 2.

Department of Environment (DoE) (10): The Ministry of Energy and Agriculture often plays the role of putting blame on farmers for overusing water. DoE is seen as a governmental agency, overseen by the president with responsibilities for the revival of Lake Urmia. Its activities on Lake Urmia included:

- Integrated Management Plan for Lake Urmia Basin together with the United Nations Development Program, approved by cabinet in 2010, with a long-term vision & goals(11).
- In 2014, DoE received a grant from Japan to work on the restoration of Lake Urmia (12)
- DoE set up Urmia Lake Restoration National Committee (ULRNC) (13) on 17 October 2013 and terminated in 2021. The ULRNC swept under the carpet the approved integrated plan and began all over again with no explanation why yet a new start!

Central Government: As Iranian authorities have been suppressing Azerbaijani campaigns, politicians reinvent their promises to ostensibly save Lake Urmia! The overview is:

Rafsanjani's Vision: Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (4th president) came up with his infamous vision to dam the Lake Urmia basin(14) in full and using the construction by the 'Jihad style'!

Khatami's Mission: Mohammad Khatami (5th president) carried on religiously with dam construction irrespective of the impacts and Azerbaijani outcries.

Ahmadinejad's Mission: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (6th president) used DoE in 2010 to get approval for the Integrated Management Plan for Lake Urmia Basin but was not actioned!

Rouhani's Mission: Hassan Rouhani (7th president) made pre-election pledges to Azerbaijanis, including: "I promise you that if I am entrusted with the executive responsibilities of the country, the problem of Lake Urmia will be resolved on the first day of my government through an action plan." He used DoE to set up Urmia Lake Restoration National Committee (ULRNC) and produced 173 project proposals to restore Lake Urmia without actioning them!

Raisi's Mission: Ebrahim Raisi (8th president) announced to discontinue ULRNC(15) but then announced that its head (Isa Kalantari) was replaced with the governor of West Azerbaijan province(16), his appointee with anti-Azerbaijani sentiments. Not surprisingly, we heard recently a new formula to save Lake Urmia:

- Trans-catchment diversion from the Little Zab catchment
- Compensation flows from the watercourses

- Letting sewerages to Lake Urmia but sewerage treatment in Iran is a chronicle problem!

The Situation Now

Now, Lake Urmia is on the brink of disappearance, with already a saltpan of some 1m deep. The authorities currently report that they are working on a trans-catchment diversion of water from Little Zab to Lake Urmia by constructing a tunnel by November 2022(17). So Lake Urmia will receive:

- 0.6 BCM from the southern rivers of West Azerbaijan,
- 0.3 BCM from wastewater of the cities at the margin of Lake Urmia
- 0.2 BCM from Little Zab.

The above figures are manipulated arbitrarily by being quoted in a variety of ways, but even taking the most optimistic way, still they make less than 40% of the flow at 3 BCM. Even if the full compensation flow is allowed, this does not address the restoration of Lake Urmia!

The lake is not dying of droughts or climate change or excessive evaporation, but plain truth is that the Iranian government chokes Lake Urmia by cutting off 3 BCM of its essential inflows. Migration is already on the way with some 4 million in the immediate vicinity of the lake at risk of becoming IDP and 14 million at its margins are at risk of untold health risks(18). Now, its Azerbaijani at-risk population are vulnerable, and their resilience and social coherence are undermined. Other impacts are real, and include the microclimate change in the region, the intensification of salt storms.

The Iranian authorities keep suppressing Azerbaijani activists and environmentalists. They are intransigents and do not learn from their mistakes. So, are they not forcing the death of Lake Urmia to inflict migration of Azerbaijanis from their native homelands? The Statement offers enough details, as some food for thought. The resented facts are substantial for the readers to make their own minds. The future is bleak but your critical views and your voice can make a difference.

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- 1- Integrated Management Plan for Lake Urmia Basin (wetlandsproject.ir)
 - 2- <https://documents-ddsny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G12/166/11/PDF/G1216611.pdf?OpenElement> then search for: A/HRC/21/NGO/119
 - 3- <http://www.tabnakazargharbi.ir/fa/news/88139>
 - 4- <http://www.dunazhak.org/dunazhak/discriptinglish526.htm> - Note: Nature Day in Farsi is called Sizdeh beder.
 - 5- <https://globalvoices.org/2011/04/04/iran-a-dying-lake-and-protesters/>
 - 6- See: Ethnicité et nationalisme en Iran - Gilles Riaux | Cairn.info
 - 7- See also: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/09/10/iran-allow-peaceful-protests-over-lakes-destruction> <https://www.rferl.org/a/transmission-protest-iran-orumieh/24588929.html>
 - 8- <https://unpo.org/article/20236>
 - 9- <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/105765> also
 - 10- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-62199184> <https://www.doe.ir/>
 - 11- <https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/lakeurmiamanagementplan-i.r.iran2010.pdf>
 - 12- <https://www.mardomsalari.ir/report/169406> This is a reasonable critique. Lake Urmia project workplan_Nov2017_final (2)_0.pdf This shows a deliverable by donations from Japan.
 - 13- <https://www.ulrp.ir/en/>
 - 14- <https://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/lakeurmiamanagementplan-i.r.iran2010.pdf>
 - 15- <https://www.ulrp.ir/en/>
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 - 17- <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5349851>
 - 18- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CgkSyZTDTK0/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY=>