

**WECUP initiative validated by UN Environmental Programme Desk Study.
Project cited as vital to Israeli-Palestinian cooperation to save the environment.**

What an awful waste

By Zafrir Rinat (haaretzdaily.com)

Nonfunctioning sewage-treatment installations are a common site in the West Bank - as environmental researchers from the United Nations who examined the environmental situation in the territories recently learned. However, even they were surprised to find residential housing put up by the Palestinians adjacent to one of these plants, in Jenin.

The reality in Jenin reflects the grave environmental situation that exists throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Although there were serious environmental problems even before the intifada, since it began, they have been exacerbated. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority's organizational capabilities have decreased and cooperation with Israel has almost come to a standstill.

The UN Environment Program received reports about the situation and, in coordination with the Israeli government and the PA, it sent investigatory teams to dozens of sites and to meet with experts and official representatives from both sides. Two weeks ago, a comprehensive report on the subject was published, which describes a serious decline in water quality, the increasing health risks that have resulted from the waste and sewage-treatment sites springing up near Palestinian population centers, and the dire need for housing solutions and public buildings for that population. The teams discovered waste sites and dumps in the streets, as well as chronic pollution that is spreading through the drinking water in areas where there is no control at all of the flow of untreated sewage.

As of today, in the Palestinian areas, there are approximately 1,500 illegal water-drilling sites that are causing a drop in the groundwater level and the infiltration of saline or sea water. The treatment of this problem, which existed before the outbreak of the intifada, has become far more difficult as governing mechanisms in the PA have lost their efficacy since reentry of the Israel Defense Forces in the territories.

There is still a certain amount of cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian authorities concerning water, but this focuses primarily on finding immediate solutions to problems in the supply. Officials in the Israeli water supply system now have no information about the amount of water the Palestinians are using from drilling sites that are located in the land under their control, nor do they have organized data on the quality of the water and the state of the springs, some of which have apparently gone dry.

No natural, pure water

According to the data collected by the UN, only about one-third of the Palestinian population is connected to a sewage system and most of the population is dependent on cesspits, from which sewage leaks into streams and wells. In one-quarter of the water samples collected by Palestinian professionals from streams and tanks that provide water in the West Bank, the levels of bacteria exceeded those permitted in drinking water according to the standards set by the World Health Organization. In Gaza, there were higher-than-permitted levels of nitrates (pollutants that have their source in sewage and fertilizers) in 50 percent of the water samples.

Today, it turns out, there is not a single spring whose water can be drunk without purification, as inhabitants used to do in the past. However, the efficacy of purifying the water with chlorine, for example, is low because of the poor maintenance of the installations that are used to dispense it.

In the larger cities, there are sewage treatment plants, but most of them are obsolete or out of order. IDF activities have done considerable damage to sewage systems and pumping plants. The situation is worst in Jericho, where there is no central system for collecting and treating sewage. In Gaza, the mouth of the Gaza streambed - the only nature reserve the Palestinians have declared - has become one big sewer.



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In the West Bank, there were no proper waste-disposal sites even before the intifada, but the problem has grown worse recently. The Palestinians are unable to use centrally located sites because of the curfews and the closures, and therefore temporary sites like the one in Jenin have sprung up. The UN researchers were unable to obtain precise figures, but estimate that there are between 200 and 450 such sites.

At many sites, trash is burned in order to decrease the problem of waste buildup, and this generates toxic substances in the air. Medical waste products and dangerous industrial runoff also pour into those sites. An additional problem is the refuse from military sources that has accumulated in many places.

According to the UN report, during the past two years, Israel has uprooted more than 14,000 trees in the defoliation process undertaken by the IDF, and for the building of roads and the expansion of Jewish settlements in the territories. The writers of the report express concern about the effects of the erection of the fences in the Gaza Strip and the separation fence in the West Bank, and say that this is a "butchering" of ecosystems that causes severe damage to their integrity.

The problem of damaging ecosystems and other areas is analyzed in the UN report via aerial photographs. These show the rapid rate of development of Jewish settlements that are exploiting large expanses of land. However, the UN report ignores Palestinian construction that in many cases is undertaken without any proper planning or effort to conserve land use. This problem is notable in the large cities where there has been extensive building in recent years.

The report also hardly relates at all to a major environmental problem that Israel has created with the paving of the bypass roads. These roads are a clear example of the brutal way considerations concerning the landscape and the conservation of the contiguity of open spaces have been ignored. They have totally destroyed not only ridges and cliffs, but also agricultural areas that have great value in terms of the genetic range of vegetation. On this matter, the UN report notes that over hundreds of years, Palestinian farmers succeeded in developing the cultivation of unique varieties of crops, and the damage to cultivated areas harms this "heritage."

No radioactive hazard

The UN report refutes the Palestinians' claim that the IDF has used ammunition that contains depleted uranium, which could expose the Palestinian population to radioactive hazards. During the visit by the UN experts, the Palestinians handed over to them the results of tests of remnants of Israeli ammunition that were undertaken at their initiative. The UN sent these tests for analysis to laboratories in Europe, where it was found that there is no evidence of the use of depleted uranium in the ammunition that was checked.

These problems of environmental pollution are not contained only within the territories of the PA: They also have considerable effects on land inside the Green Line (1967 borders), as various Israeli sources report. The most obvious example of this is the flow of sewage via all the large streams from the Palestinian cities into Israel. This phenomenon has increased since the plans for the construction of treatment plants in the Palestinian cities have been halted by the security situation.

About half of the sewage of the cities of Tul Karm and Qalqilyah flows into Israeli territory. In the city of Hebron, there is no sewage-treatment system and the waste flows in the direction of the northern Negev and Be'er Sheva, constituting a serious hazard, especially for Bedouin locales. Recently this matter came before the High Court of Justice after two Bedouin rights organizations filed a petition asking for the state to deal with the problem of sewage in the Hebron streambed. The flow of sewage and flooding in the streambed have prevented children from one of the unrecognized Bedouin settlements from getting to school. The High Court ruled that the state must erect a small bridge over the streambed for the children as soon as possible.

Another serious problem is the spread of hunting and grazing into areas that are highly sensitive ecologically - for example, in the Judean Desert. According to the Israel Nature and National Parks Protection Authority, herds of camels, goats and cattle are pushing the wildlife out of the edges of the desert. Palestinian hunters enter Israeli territory in the Judean Desert, and constitute one of the factors in the worrisome decline in the numbers of mountain goats in the area of the desert plateau.

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Israel has responded to the problem of sewage by setting up collection basins that will prevent the flow of waste into the Alexander and Yarkon rivers. At the beginning of January, the government also authorized several important decisions in the matter of the sewage from the PA. One was to write off the costs of dealing with the sewage against the PA funds that are being held by Israel. Another decision was to collect the sewage flowing from the Hebron streambed and to direct it to the treatment plant in the city of Be'er Sheva.

The UN team published a long list of recommendations for dealing with the environmental problems. One is to revive Israeli-Palestinian cooperation so that urgent environmental problems will be dealt with. This includes the renewal of the activity of the joint committee of experts on environmental problems that had begun to operate under the Oslo agreements and functioned until the beginning of the intifada. Initially this could be difficult, notes the UN report, but in order to overcome the difficulties, the two sides on the committee of experts can bring in a third side that will act as a bridge between them.

However, nongovernmental organizations have been continuing their cooperation with regard to the situation. Friends of the Earth-Middle East has launched a struggle to improve the water infrastructures in the territories, and is fighting together with Palestinian and Jordanian elements to preserve the Dead Sea - a battle that has won international acclaim.

Recently, with funding from an American businessman, a new organization has been established called the West Bank Environment Cleaning-Up Project. The organization's main aim is to save the mountain aquifer, which serves as a source of water for both the Palestinians and the Israelis.

While these organizations do not have the ability to change the environmental reality, they are trying to ensure that it will not disappear from the consciousness of decision-makers and the Palestinian and Israeli public.