Quenching Algeria's thirst

By ABDELMALEK SELLAL
Minister of Water Resources, Algeria

ABDELMALEK SELLAL was born in Constantine in 1948. He was Algeria's Ambassador to Hungary and has held several ministerial appointments including Minister of Local Authorities and Environment, of Youth and Sport, Civil Engineering and of Transport. He directed the presidential campaign of HE Abdelaziz Bouteflika before being appointed Minister of Water Resources.

Water shortages in the world and the management of water resources is one of the major problems of the 21st century. Climate change and drought are affecting several regions in the world, notably Africa and around the Mediterranean, impacting negatively on water resources and consequently, on their social and economic development.

Algeria is situated in a region which has scant rainfall. The shortfall in our water resources is aggravated by:

- Water resources being inefficiently distributed;
- Rainfall being unpredictable;
- Water erosion.

A main feature, therefore, of the present situation is an imbalance between needs and available resources. The country's population growth and its social and economic development over the past two decades have led to a considerable increase in the demand for drinking water and for water for agricultural and industrial purposes. An overall strategy has been set up to define our needs, our capacity, and the investment required to increase our resources by 2025.

At the present moment, 6 billion (bn) cubic metres of water are collected by 57 dams and by drilling wells. By 2025, this volume of water, including that produced by desalination plants, should have increased to 12.1 bn cubic metres per year to answer a demand for 12.5 bn cubic metres per year, thanks to investment in the sector, and large-scale projects being undertaken at present, such as the construction of 12 dams and large-scale piping of water.

We are also intending to exploit the immense underground water reserves in Albien in the South, mainly by piping water on a large scale to the High Plateaux in order to develop the farming and industrial sectors.

It should be noted that the State has invested nearly US$30 bn over the past thirty years. By 2025, the total investment will be around US$25 bn, to complete its development programme for the sector.

In other words, the water resources sector continues to accumulate its reserves by using conventional methods such as dams, piping water and drilling wells, to repair its networks of pipes and especially, to improve the running of the public water service which remains one of our main concerns.

A few of the important operations underway at present are the Beni Haroun Dam, which will pipe water to the six eastern counties; the piping of water from the Tichy Haf Dam to the Akbou-Sidi Aich-Bejaia corridor, as well as the large scale projects in the process of being realised for the piping of water from the Taksebt Dam to Tizi Ouzou, Boumerdes and Algiers; the dam on the Cheliff river which will bring water to Mostaganem, Arzew and Oran, and the piping of water to the High Plateaux from the Koudiat Acerdoune Dam, which will be completed in 2007.

These are only a few of the large-scale projects which have already found funding and which should be launched at the end of this year. For the irrigation of farming lands, the sector is renovating more than 200 low-volume dams in use at present and the construction of nearly 300 others, as well as building irrigated perimeters.

The two other main axes of the Government's strategy are to recycle liquid waste and to desalinate seawater. This recycled liquid waste can be used by the farming and industrial sectors.

As far as desalination is concerned, the present programme should ensure that in 2009, there will be a secured supply of drinking water for people living in coastal cities. It opens new prospects in water resource management because the limiting factor is no longer the volume of water available, but the amount of energy guaranteed in Algeria. Desalination is made possible by the existence of a 1,000 kilometre long coastline, a practically unpolluted and inexhaustible supply of water, and an important demand for water near this coastline, making this water supply even less expensive by eliminating transport costs.

The Energy and Mines sector, through the Algerian Energy Company (AEC) and in partnership with ADE (the Algerian Water Company), has launched an ambitious programme for the installation of 14 water desalination plants along the Algerian coastline, with a total capacity of 1.9 million cubic metres per day,

Several foreign investors are taking part in this ambitious programme, of which, some are British, and we would like to encourage them in the context of a transparent, competitive atmosphere.

The sector is therefore open to all partners wishing to invest in Algeria, whether it be in the construction phase, the delegated management of drinking water distribution, direct investment or partnerships in the field of water resources. F