

The official water line

Dina Ezzat listens to the government's defence over its failure to provide the public with sufficient clean water

Abdel-Qawi Khalifa is the chairman of the Holding Company for Water and Sewage (HCWS). His company was initiated in 2004 to be part of a wider government-supervised mechanism in charge of providing Egypt's governorates with clean water, irrigation water and sewage systems. Along with three other bodies that are also supervised by the Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, HCWS is now being kept on its toes following public outrage over the lack of sufficient supplies of clean water, not just in many rural areas but in many parts of Cairo, including upscale neighbourhoods.

Khalifa, his aides say, is working round the clock following up on complaints and pursuing what they qualify as an ambitious plan not just to resolve the current disturbing problems of water supplies (they are not really willing to acknowledge an acute drop in the supply of clean water) but also to once and for all ensure that every Egyptian will have his or her full needs (they do not like the word adequate) of clean water met.

Such optimistic statements are immediately undermined by the growing images of anger in many parts of the country, of entire cities and villages that either suffer water shortages on a daily basis or have been denied access to clean water for weeks on end.

Khalifa himself seems more modest in his assessment of his company's ability to immediately resolve the current problem that he fully acknowledges. "This is a problem that is going to take time to be resolved properly and permanently," he told *Al-Ahram Weekly* in his office on 16 July. Khalifa was speaking in the middle of handling continuous incoming calls from hot-spots in and out of Cairo that provide him with progress reports on the efforts made to upgrade the performance of water supply stations.

"We are really working hard but we have to accept that despite this hard work that covers the entire country... We cannot claim that we are providing 100 per cent of the water we are expected to provide... In fact some five per cent [or a little more] of the Egyptian population does not have real access to clean drinking water, not yet anyway," Khalifa acknowledged.

Currently, he said, the total production of clean water is 20 million cubic metres per day. This amount, he added, "should be sufficient to provide all villages with enough drinking water." The reason this has not been the case, he argued, is that the distribution is not entirely egalitarian. This, he hastened to add, is not a problem resulting from any deliberate attempt to provide upscale neighbourhoods with "plenty of water" at the expense of economically disadvantaged cities or villages. He underlined that some of the areas with a high level of complaints over the level of water supplies include some of the newer and most upscale neighbourhoods. The problem, he argued, is rather one of difficulties involved in providing all the necessary networks that can carry clean drinking water to everyone.

Khalifa said this is primarily due "to the fact that for a long time there were not enough resources allocated to upgrade the networks and stations that provide clean water supplies to the country." He does not attribute this to governmental insensitivity or unawareness of the needs involved but rather to the "ultimate limitations" of the budget of any developing country and "above all" to the lack of coordinated plans among the many bodies that handle water supplies across the country. This, he added, is why it was "necessary and beneficiary" to establish the HCWS so that it could be in charge of the operation and maintenance of water stations and networks across the country. Once it became operative, HCWS initiated projects that identify the problematic areas, Khalifa said.

In a way, he added, there was a sense of gloomy expectation that the problems now being encountered in several cities and villages was right around the corner. "Had it not been for our work, which aims to immediately address the most acute problems, today the situation would have been far worse," he said, adding, "when all is said and done, nobody can underestimate the frustration of individuals who do not have sufficient or even any access to clean water. But this is not what I am trying to say. What I am trying to say is that we have a problem and we are working on resolving this problem as fast and as efficiently as we possibly can."

An increase of 40 per cent of the amount of clean water produced daily is the prime objective that Khalifa said, if achieved, would signal a real end to the water problem. "We want to go from 20 million cubic metres a day to 28 million cubic metres. This is what we are targeting," he said. To meet such demand, HCWS and the other companies in charge of water supplies would need no less than LE17 billion. Khalifa is not sure where the money will come from. "I cannot say that there will be any increase in the cost of water to houses and other facilities. This is something for the government to decide. What I know is that it costs about 80 piastres to produce a litre of clean water and that each litre is provided to the citizen at no more than 40 per cent of its actual cost. So there are big subsidies involved," he explained.

But it is not just money that Khalifa needs. HCWS also needs time to complete the upgrade of operative water networks and stations and to build new ones. But Khalifa is elusive about the period of time needed to complete the construction of all the necessary projects. When pressed he suggests that the problem of water shortages "will be resolved gradually." Within five years, he predicts there will be no problem in providing every Egyptian with enough clean water. This, he added, would include an end to the "shift-based" system of water supplies that is operated in several villages. "Today, there are villages that [have] access [to] clean water only for a few hours a day. This is the daily norm that does not even work during summer due to the excessive amount of water usage."

When HCWS is done with its "strategic master plan" for the entire country, Khalifa promises, "every citizen will have a steady flow of clean water with no problems at all. Indeed, the per person share of clean water per day would rise from the current 422 litres to 540 litres." Until then, he acknowledged, problems might occur and reoccur.

The one thing that Khalifa seems willing to announce without hesitation is that the clean water produced by his company "is perfectly safe for consumption.

"Personally," he said, "I do not rely on bottled or mineral water at all. I only drink tap water."