

Not a drop to drink

[Dina Ezzat](#) joins those suffering from lack of sufficient -- at times any -- potable water. Photographer **Sherif Sonbol** captured the dry mood

It has become a daily concern in many parts of Egypt, including the middle and upper class neighbourhoods of the capital. Nor does the problem exclude Heliopolis, the residential neighbourhood of no other than the president. "You wake up in the morning and you don't know whether you will be able to wash your face and go to the bathroom, or have to call up [a close relative or friend] who lives outside Heliopolis and Nasr City to see if you can pass by to shower and use the toilet," said Thurayah, a Heliopolis resident.



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It might be easier to find water on Mars than in some of these Egyptian villages

Thurayah is married with three children. Her life during the days of no water is not at all easy. She has to take the children to the homes of her mother or mother-in-law in Doqqi or Zamalek. She has to do the laundry at either house. From there, she has to bring enough water in big containers for her cleaning lady to wash the bathroom and kitchen. "Forget about the balconies. That's a luxury." The entire family eats out and spends as much time as possible visiting with the extended family or at the sporting club to avoid their waterless home. Bottled water is bought at the above 30-bottle a week average, for it is used for purposes other than drinking.

Still, Thurayah is lucky. Her suffering from sudden water shortages started only during the past couple of years. Before that she never had a problem with H₂O. Born and brought up in Heliopolis where she has been living since her marriage, Thurayah, a 43-year-old banker, recalls that during the 1980s there were times when there were water shortages. "But it was every now and then. Now we really have a problem. Since the beginning of this summer it has become an acute problem because actually it is quite recurrent. Towards the beginning of the summer we had three days where there was not a single drop of water." She added, "imagine with three children who want to wash up at least twice during the day. I'm not even talking about cooking or doing the laundry. It's really tough."

But Thurayah can afford to eat out and buy bottled water for drinking and toilet purposes. She can send the children to her in-laws. And she can comfort herself that her best friend, who lives in a nice house with a swimming pool in Al-Shorouq city, an upscale neighbourhood, suffers from a similar problem.

Gohariyah, who lives in Al-Aiyash village in the northern governorate of Kafr Al-Sheikh, has no such luck. "We haven't had any clean water for the past week. This is too much. We are human beings. We deserve to have clean water," she said.

Living in a one-floor building made up of three rooms, a bathroom and a kitchen with her husband, seven children and three of her grandchildren, Gohariyah faces a daily struggle to manage the water problem. In the morning she needs to take her 20-litre tanks, essentially car oil tanks that she bought, to the Baltim resort, for a ride that costs about LE3 and lasts two hours, so that she can fill the tanks for about LE2 before spending another LE3 and two hours

to return. Then she has to cook and clean up. "We have no sewage system in our village. Cleaning the bathroom is essential "otherwise the children will catch all sorts of summer diseases".

Once done with these tasks, Gohariyah must take water in a drinking pottery pot and food to her husband in the field. There she takes some of the fruits that he harvested to sell before she returns to her house to wash up "with no more than three glasses of water" and "warm up five glasses of water for [her] husband so he can wash up and pray after a long day at the fields." Then, Gohariyah allows her daughters to wash up. The boys "wash up at the river stream when they take the cows and hens to drink". Gohariyah tries to save the used washing-up water to clean the bathroom or do some of the laundry. "We save as much water as possible. But during the past week, Gohariyah's family has spent over LE50 on providing the "very basic needs of water".

Al-Aiyash is a fairly small village. No local council officials were available to indicate the number of its inhabitants. However, individuals assess that it is a village big enough for a few thousand to live in. Clean drinking water was made available for the villagers of Al-Aiyash, as they say, close to 15 years ago. But since that day, which was celebrated by all the village inhabitants, the flow of "clean water was never steady". "We would have tap water for a few hours a day only," Gohariyah said. She added that during the summer, things are always difficult because there is a high level of consumption of potable water by holidaymakers who visit Baltim. This summer, however, Gohariyah said it has been exceptionally difficult. "Since the beginning of May we've had recurrent water problems. We are very sick and tired. We cannot keep suffering." Gohariyah said it was not enough for the government to send a mobile water container to their village once every two weeks to sell water to the villagers. The supplies, she complained, are very limited and "people almost kill one another to get a tank fill of water. Is this fair? This cannot be fair." She added, "we are humans who deserve better treatment. We are citizens of this country. We should not be forgotten," she said.

Speaking to *Al-Ahram Weekly* along with Fatema, a neighbour of hers, Gohariyah said the last thing villagers want is "to oppose the government. We are simple villagers. We do not worry about politics. But we want the government to worry about our rights. If the government does not pay attention to us then we will have to do exactly like the villagers of Al-Borg," she warned.

Al-Borg is another village, albeit bigger than Al-Aiyash, in the Kafr Al-Sheikh governorate. A couple of weeks ago, its villagers, including fishermen, desperate for "any attention from the government", and for that matter the "governor of Kafr Al-Sheikh", decided to make their own headlines. With small fishing canoes they blocked the highway that connects Kafr Al-Sheikh with other northern and southern governorates. For close to 12 hours the road was blocked as villagers and fishermen shouted for potable water.

"We were screaming. Yes we were. We shouted and asked for drinking water. Is this a crime in modern Egypt? Don't we have the right to have water to drink? Don't we have the right to wash up and clean our bodies? Don't we have the right to wash our clothes and clean up our children whose bodies have become sore with infections as a result of the heat and dirt?"

These were the words of Sherif Hamdi, a 21- year-old carpenter. He went on the road-blocking demonstration with other villagers of Al-Borg. "The governor went on TV and said we are a group of ignorant and misled individuals. He said we acted foolishly. But our

characterisation is not the issue. The issue is why can't he do his job properly and provide us with potable water?"

Hamdi was speaking to the *Weekly* along with scores of men and women who gathered around the car carrying the logo of *Al-Ahram*. They all had the same story to tell, albeit in different words. Much of their ire was directed at what they qualified as the "insults" directed at them by Governor Salah Salama during short interventions accorded by him to Egyptian and satellite channels that questioned him on the plight of the villagers of Al-Borg. The anger was not confined to what they termed degrading language he allegedly used against them but indeed and more explicitly to what they called his "indifferent reaction". "He says that there will be an end to our problem in a year's time when they manage to operate a mega- water pump that would provide the entire village with sufficient water. He wants us to wait until 2008," Hamdi said.

Also shared by many who spoke to the *Weekly* en masse was the expression of suffering. Men complained that they cannot wash up when they come back from the fields or the sea after a long day's hard labour. Women complained that providing water -- a female (women or girls) task for some inexplicable reason -- has been added to an already tough and long list of duties. They complained that they cannot clean their houses or for that matter their own bodies.

The accounts of suffering vary from predictable -- "if my daughter drops a glass of water I cannot help but beat her for that terrible waste" -- to the very intimate "I have not shared any marital intimacy with my husband for two weeks because we cannot afford a full bath except once every other week. If we have sex we cannot pray unless we bath."

Some of the accounts provided by the villagers of Al-Borg reflect an outright violation of human dignity. "I live with my mother-in-law who is sick. I'm scared she'll die and we would not have enough water to wash her for the burial, as we must. We try to keep a tank of water untouched for such an emergency but sometimes when we are short on money to buy enough water, we use the reserve," said Ali Mohamed.

Mohamed is much better off than Fahima, a widow with five children who makes only LE10 a day and does not have enough money to buy any water. "I have to beg for water. Some people gave me two old tanks but then it was a big problem of how to fill these tanks," Fahima told the *Weekly*.

Following the demonstration in Al-Borg, clean water supplies that should be made available for at least two hours every other day during the summer months was made available for four hours. Then nothing. "We are back to where we were. If the problem persists we will have to protest again," Hamdi said, to the loud support of many villagers who shouted: "Yes. We will block the road again. They can take us to jail. At least there we will find water to drink."

The anger of the villagers of Al-Aiyash and Al-Borg is not confined to what they describe as an inattentive governmental response to their problem. It goes beyond that to their perception of socio-economic discrepancies. They say that if the government does not have enough resources to solve this acute problem, then, as one said, "the rich should contribute."

"Let us assume that the government does not have the money. What about those rich businessmen that we hear of? They have millions and millions. Can they not donate, even as

charity, to the poor of their country so that we can have clean water to drink? Would they like their children to be left without a bath for days?" said Ibrahim Salama.

The villagers' assessment of their problem includes an assessment of more complicated political deals. "We are being punished for electing Hamdine Sabbahi, an opposition politician [Nasserist] as our member of parliament," speculated Hamdi. He added that while Al-Borg's shortage of potable water supplies is not new it has been particularly aggravated.

Sabbahi was unavailable for comment.

According to the villagers of Al-Aiyash and Al-Borg, the duty of Sabbahi to raise this matter to "the highest level possible" is mandatory. They warned that if he fails to address this matter, "especially after the public insults of the governor", they would not re-elect him.

In Al-Hammad, another nearby village of Kafr Al-Sheikh governorate, the anger of Sabbahi, the governor and for that matter the ruling National Democratic Party is much more palpable than it is at Al-Aiyash and Al-Borg. Al-Hammad has simply no potable water at all. "No sewage and no potable water, then they tell us on TV that we have to keep clean and to keep our birds clean to avoid bird flu. Well, we do not have water to do this. The only source of water we have is either stream water or the water that we buy from Baltim to drink and cook with," said Emad Ragab of Al-Hammad.

Escorting the *Weekly* crew to his house, Ragab insisted on showing his bathroom which has not been properly cleaned for weeks "because the demand on buying water has increased due to the problem suffered by neighbouring villages" and the kitchen where there is neither a working faucet nor a sink. "And it is not just my house. There is no water at the mosque for us to wash and pray. There is no water at the hospital. There is simply no water."

Dalal, a 12-year-old villager in Al-Hammad, said she only saw tap water and tubs in the movies she watches on TV. Her dream is to have a faucet, a shower and a sink in their house one day. She heard about the demonstrations in Al-Borg and asked her father if he, too, could demonstrate so that her dream may come true.

The plight of these villages is echoed elsewhere in the country. On the front page of the *Al-Ahram* daily on Tuesday there was news of another demonstration protesting against the lack of water, this time in the village of Beshbish in the governorate of Gharbiya. Other dailies and weeklies have also reported stories of similar problems in other governorates where people have been infected because of using old water saved for long periods in tanks or dug out of superficial wells.

No governmental response has been made as of yet.