**Besor River -- a hostage of politics**

**Besor River** could have had clean water running in it and a healthy ecological system could have flourished along it. But for years, foul-smelling sewage and waste from the Hebron marble sawmills has been running through it. A treatment facility that was supposed to open two years ago is only in the pilot stage but it is doubtful it can treat such polluted water.

Yael Ivri Darel, Ynet, May 10

Imagine walking along a river with the sounds of trickling water and bird song in the background. You dip your feet in the cool water and walk through the green shrub. That is what a pleasant walk along Besor River could be like. Too bad it has been serving as a smelly sewage canal for years.

Until a few years ago, industrial sewage from Ramat Hovav and sewage from the neighboring settlements flowed into the river. Then, when treatment plants were built in the area the amount of sewage in the river diminished but 15,000 m³ of sewage are still dumped into its water every day. Most of the sewage is from households but some of it, coming from Hebron, also includes poisonous runoff from the city's marble sawmills. The experts agree: time is running out and without a dramatic change the river will suffer irreversible damage.

The river's already difficult situation gets worse in the summer. "Every year between May and November the situation gets worse," head of the Eshkol Regional Council, Chaim Yellin, told Ynet. In the summer, when the flow weakens, mosquitoes carrying West Nile flu gather in the area. The mosquito hazard endangers the health of the residents and the soldiers of the nearby military bases and keeps hikers away. Yellin, in charge of the river rehabilitation administration, thinks it will be years until the damage can be overcome and the river rehabilitated.

The pollution of the Besor River affects residents on both sides of the Green Line as well as the groundwater that serves everyone. Friends of the Earth Middle East held a conference on this subject last week and claimed that the Besor, like other environmental hazards, has become hostage to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Neglect of the river, according to the organization, represents Israel's policy regarding water in relation to the Palestinians. They say the case of the river is special because both Israel and the PA are both up and down stream.

"Israel's water policy prevents the Palestinians from receiving clean water and it is destructive both in environmental and humanitarian terms," said Nader Khatib, the Palestinian CEO of the organization. He accuses Israel of operating pumps that drain rainwater in its area and preventing the infusion of water that could have changed the balance in their favor.

"The threat of pollution to the mountain aquifer, the biggest water reserve in the country and the only one that supplies water to the PA, is getting worse. It also contradicts the effort to save every drop of water," said Gidon Bromberg, the Israeli CEO of the organization.

"The residents of Gaza complain that their water gets polluted here in Israel, but they should direct their complaints first of all to their brothers in the West Bank, because most of the pollution comes from Hebron," claims Yellin, on the other hand. "There should be no doubt: everybody wants clean water."
There is pollution all along the river. At the conference the World Bank representative explained that as a result of untreated sewage reservoirs in the Gaza Strip there is considerable environmental pollution in the river bed. The Bank, USAID and the PA are having difficulty recruiting investors and donors to build waste treatment facilities in the Gaza Strip and West Bank because of the delays and dangers of investing in the area.

Even when the money is available, he said, Israel's failure to provide permits to develop projects delays and sometimes completely cancels the execution of projects. For example, the representative said the World Bank is funding the rehabilitation and upgrading of the waste treatment reservoir at Beit Lahiya in the northern Gaza Strip, but Israel is preventing the passage of equipment and materials needed to complete the work. In 2007 the reservoir collapsed and flooded entire streets, causing the death of seven residents and the spread of diseases.

A process began on the Israeli side that was supposed to improve the situation. A sewage treatment facility under construction at Shoket Junction is supposed to treat the sewage of the neighboring settlements (Meitar and the Bedouin Diaspora) and issue treated water. The facility was supposed to begin operating two years ago but its operation has repeatedly been delayed. Today it is in the pilot stage and there already is concern it will not be able to handle the polluted water coming from Hebron.

"A lot of the Hebron sewage includes stone and marble waste originating in the area's quarries and factories and this makes the sewage treatment difficult. Because it is not only household sewage it requires preliminary treatment," the Ministry of Infrastructure said.

"A special professional team was created to solve the problem and determine exactly what process is required for the treatment of that waste. One of the options under consideration is building another facility for the preliminary treatment. Because of the large quantity of sewage coming from Hebron and the nearby settlements we are considering building a bigger preliminary treatment facility to meet the new circumstances."

Until the committee decides what the appropriate preliminary treatment is, and until the facility is built, the treatment facility will be unable to treat the sewage and infuse cleaner water into the Besor. The question that remains open is whether the river has the patience to wait.