



Three Gorges to release water

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The massive Three Gorges Dam has been ordered to release nearly five billion cubic metres of water in the next two weeks to help relieve a severe drought downstream amid grim forecasts of a prolonged dry spell.

The move came after Beijing made an unusual admission last week about the dam's dire consequences for the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River.

The State Council's order to release the water is believed to be part of Beijing's efforts to offset the dam's impact on navigation, irrigation and water supplies after the project was blamed for aggravating one of the mainland's worst droughts.

Deeply embarrassed, mainland authorities have flatly denied any link between the dam and the drought and barred further media coverage of the debate.

However, the drought - affecting millions of people in the seven central and eastern provinces and Shanghai and threatening grain output - looks likely to worsen despite a downpour over the weekend and Beijing's last-ditch effort to replenish hundreds of rivers, lakes and reservoirs downstream of the dam.

At full capacity, the dam holds back 39.3 billion cubic metres of water, so it has been ordered to release about 12 per cent of that amount. The China Three Gorges Corporation says the average annual run-off in the dam's catchment area is 451 billion cubic metres.

The meteorological authorities issued a grim warning yesterday, forecasting another week of high temperatures and little rainfall, Xinhua reported. "Drought in some of the affected areas is likely to continue or even worsen," the China Meteorological Administration said.

Due to a lack of rainfall on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River this year and the water stored behind the dam, water levels in China's top four freshwater lakes - Poyang in Jiangxi, Dongting in Hunan and Tai and Hongze in Jiangsu - have dropped to or near record lows.

Almost 90 per cent of the vast Poyang Lake has been reduced to a flat plain of dust, providing training grounds for local driving schools, China News Service reported.

In Hubei, nearly 10 million people in 87 cities and counties have been hit by the prolonged drought, which started last winter, with rainfall in the central province in the past six months being the lowest in more than half a century.

Most of the more than 1,600 reservoirs in Hubei have dried up and 1.2 million hectares of farmland are suffering from chronic water shortages.

Water levels at the Danjiangkou Dam on the Han River, a tributary of the Yangtze, have also dropped to a record low. Frequent droughts at the dam, the water source for the South-North Water Diversion Project's central route, have fuelled concerns over the feasibility of the costly project.

Authorities in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui and Shanghai have also taken a series of measures to counter the drought, including cloud seeding, drilling wells and increased subsidies.

Although the mainland authorities have insisted that global warming, peculiar weather patterns and a lack of rainfall are the main culprits for the drought, downstream provinces have grown more concerned about the impact of the 185-metre-tall Three Gorges Dam.

They often point to the fact that droughts have become more frequent and severe since the reservoir began to fill a few years ago.

The dam has been embroiled in similar water shortage controversies almost every year for the past four years.

Xinhua also said human factors, such as ecological damage, huge amounts of waste, old irrigation technology and insufficient funding, had contributed to the severity of the drought. By the end of 2007, the mainland had 87,000 reservoirs, but 43 per cent were in poor condition.

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