

# 10 mighty rivers in deep water



Global warming will further reduce the flow in the Ganges (above) and Indus in India.

## 10 MOST ENDANGERED RIVER BASINS

1. Danube
2. Yangtze
3. Rio Grande
4. Salween
5. Nile
6. Indus
7. Ganges
8. Plata
9. Mekong
10. Murray-Darling

WASHINGTON: Mighty rivers that inspired religions, civilisations and explorers are among the 10 most threatened in the world. Rivers such as the Nile, the Indus and the Ganges were dying because of stresses put on them by mankind, the WWF said in a report published yesterday.

Each of the 10 river systems identified in the report is beset by man-made problems, including water being siphoned off, dams destroying ecosystems and pollution. They flowed across six continents and the damage threatened the lives of people and wildlife, the WWF said.

About 41 per cent of the world's population live in threatened river systems, and of the 10,000 species of freshwater animals and plants at least 20 per cent are extinct.

"In the last 50 years, we have altered ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any other period in history," the report states.

"Physical alteration, habitat loss and degradation, water extraction, over-exploitation, pollution, and the introduction

of invasive species threaten the planet's freshwater ecosystems."

Most river basins face multiple threats, and to draw up a list of the 10 most endangered, the conservation charity used published reports and the judgment of its own experts. The list comprises river systems that have suffered extensive damage and freshwater networks likely to be markedly changed over the next decade.

The Danube in Europe was named as one of those that has been severely damaged, having lost 80 per cent of its wetlands and floodplains.

In Asia, the Salween is one of only 21 of the world's 177 longest rivers that still run freely from source to the sea. However, 16 large dams are planned for the river, and the alteration in the landscape could prove disastrous for wildlife.

Water extraction for agriculture, industry and domestic use is such a problem for the Rio Grande in North America and the Ganges in In-

dia that there are shortages farther downstream, flow levels having fallen sharply.

Flow in the Ganges and the Indus is expected to be further reduced because of the disappearance of Himalayan glaciers, a trend attributed to global warming. "With climate warming, many glaciers will no longer exist to moderate the flow of these rivers," the report says.

Australia's Murray and Darling river system is under pressure from introduced species that are out-competing native fish, which have suffered 90 per cent reductions in

numbers in the past two centuries.

Over-fishing is cited as another serious problem for rivers, notably the Mekong, which drains an area in Asia twice the size of Germany.

Similarly, pollution from rapid economic development is blamed for the deterioration of the Yangtze in China. "The Yangtze used to be so clear that you could see a pen sink to the bottom. Now it has become so dirty that it is not fit for drinking," the report said.

The WWF called on governments and businesses to take better care of their water sup-

plies to make sure that they remain sustainable resources for people and wildlife.

David Tickner, head of the organisation's freshwater programme, said: "Unabated development is jeopardising nature's ability to meet our growing demands. The world is facing a massive freshwater crisis, which has the potential to be every bit as devastating as climate change.

"Conservation of rivers and wetlands and security of water flows must be seen as part and parcel of national security, health and economic success." — The Times

## Azerbaijan reporter, editor on trial for story criticising Islam

BAKU (Azerbaijan): Two journalists accused of inciting religious hatred with an article that criticised Islam went on trial here yesterday, with both accusing authorities of waging a politically-motivated prosecution.

The case against reporter Rafiq Tagi and editor Samir Huseinov has touched a nerve in this country, a mostly Muslim, ex-Soviet republic with a secular government that has little tolerance for independent media.

Tagi's November article in the small newspaper *Senet* was edited by Huseinov.

The article sparked angry

protests, including calls for Tagi's death, in a village near here whose conservative Muslim community has clashed with the authoritarian, secular government.

The case has deepened concerns about freedom of speech and foreign influence in the oil-rich former Soviet republic.

Tagi told the court: "My article was purely artistic, a literary discussion and for words one must only answer with words.

"It is illegal to imprison someone for his convictions." Huseinov told the court his constitutional rights had been

violated and that authorities were trying to portray him as not being Muslim.

He accused officials of being politically motivated.

If convicted, both could face three to five years in prison.

The government of President Ilham Aliiev, who took over from his father in a 2003 election, has faced criticism over the heavy-handed treatment of independent media.

The trial was expected to be closely watched in the West, which is interested in Azerbaijan because of its vast oil and gas wealth and its strategic position between Iran and Russia. — AP



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