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# INTELLIGENCE NOTE

BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

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## IRAN-AFGHANISTAN: TROUBLE OVER THE HELMAND RIVER WATERS

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Three years of drought have revived differences between Iran and Afghanistan over the division of the Helmand River waters in the arid regions along their common borders. This issue has been an irritant to Iran-Afghan relations since 1872, and the two countries have been trying to reach a formal agreement on it since the early 1950's. The Afghan government says it intends to press on with conclusion and parliamentary consideration of the nearly-complete agreement, but mutual distrust, misunderstandings, and recriminations over the use of what little water there is this year have injected an extra note of strain into Tehran-Kabul relations.

The current controversy was triggered in June 1971 by the visit to Kabul of an Iranian fact-finding mission sent to investigate Helmand water shortages. Afghan legislators and the Kabul vernacular press saw Iranian complaints about the paucity of Helmand water reaching Iran's Sistan province as symptomatic of the overbearing attitude of the Iranians toward their "country cousins" in Afghanistan. Afghan ill-feeling was enhanced by the GOI's issuance, during last month's 25th

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Centenary celebrations, of maps and publicity handouts featuring past Persian control of large areas now belonging to Afghanistan.

The Afghan government is hampered by the need to proceed cautiously in dealing with its inexperienced parliament. Any appearance of capitulation to Iranian pressure could lead to demonstrations by unruly Afghan farmers already critical of government relief measures in the drought-stricken regions.

On the Iranian side, the government is under some pressure from the waterless inhabitants of Sistan; the bureaucracy is probably getting a distorted picture of the facts in the case from subordinate officials; and Tehran's willingness to compromise may well be reduced by the general Iranian conviction that Afghans are slow and devious.

The Helmand waters dispute generally subsides when water is plentiful. This year's crisis is important only if it further delays a formal agreement on the division of the waters. Fortunately, both sides are responding favorably to U.S. counsels of restraint and seem to be moving toward an interim resolution of the dispute through resort to an impartial fact-finding and mediatory mission from the World Bank, whose experts have considerable knowledge of the technicalities of the problem and of the region.

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