
AFGHANS PROTEST ROUHANI'S CRITICISM OF DAMS IN COUNTRY

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Afghans took to the streets in the capital Kabul on Sunday to denounce Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's remarks against the construction of dams in the war-torn country.

Organized by the Afghanistan National Cooperation (ANC) party, the rally saw hundreds of protesters chant slogans against Iran and Rouhani.

Earlier this week, the Iranian president said Tehran could not remain indifferent to the construction of dams in Afghanistan.

"Dam construction in Afghanistan and Sistan-Baluchestan province [in Iran] play a role in the desiccation of rivers," Rouhani said at the opening of a three-day international conference on combating sand and dust storms in Tehran, Iran's Financial Tribune daily reported. "People will be forced to leave their homes; civilizations will be destroyed."

Afghan government officials, parliamentarians and civil society activists in various parts of the country have called Rouhani's remarks "interference" in Afghanistans internal affairs.

Najibullah Kabuli, head of the ANC, told Anadolu Agency that Iran was involved in destabilizing Afghanistan in a bid to gain control of its water resources.

"For years, Iran has been fueling violence in the Afghanistan provinces bordering Iran to hinder development of dams such as Kamal Khan Dam, Salma Dam and reconstruction of Kajaki Dam," he said.

Ten police officers guarding Salma Dam in the western Herat province bordering Iran were killed in a terrorist attack last month. Funded by the Indian government, the project is also known as "Afghan-India Friendship Dam". It was completed last summer.

Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani told a government meeting on Sunday that water was a major resource for Afghanistan, and the government would develop a legal foundation to better capitalize on this resource.

"We are already investing in dams and irrigation infrastructure to raise agricultural productivity, and as technical designs are completed, we will be accelerating investment in this sector that is key for both growth and poverty reduction," Ghani told the 20th Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board Meeting attended by members of the government and international diplomatic community.

Previously on Friday, Basir Azimi, spokesman for the Ministry of Energy and Water said the

government was planning to build 20 more large and medium-sized dams in the country.

Meanwhile, Iranian Ambassador Mohammad Reza Bahrami said his country respected Afghanistan's national interests and added that Rouhani's remarks were misunderstood by Afghans.

"No doubt, Rouhani did not mean what has been perceived from his remarks. He was talking about regional challenges, about a regional crisis," Bahrami was quoted as saying in an interview published by local TOLONews on Friday.

Afghan officials accuse Iran -- the only country that Afghanistan has a water treaty with -- of taking up to 70 percent more water than agreed upon in 1973, and of building infrastructure on the incoming water without Afghanistans consent.

The Afghan-Iran Water treaty was signed between former Afghan and Iranian prime ministers, Musa Shafiq and Amir Abas Huwaida.

Kaynak/Source: