

Palestinians express frustration over lack of water in summer heat

BEIT JALLA, West Bank - The temperature had not yet risen that July morning when Agnes Abed Rabbo looked out her living room window and saw her neighbor hunched over, hauling a heavy load of water bottles and water coolers up the steep road to his house.

“He looked exhausted, bent over those bottles,” Abed Rabbo, who is Catholic, recalled later in the morning. “I felt sorry for him.”

But Issa Zuarob, 62, is not alone in his almost daily quest for water. He and his neighbors struggle with the yearly summer water shortage, which has become a way of life for Palestinians for almost 20 years. The problem has gotten worse over the past few years, but this year it is dramatically worse due in part to poor winter rainfall.

Sometimes when people run out of water they take drinking water from neighbors who have more water tanks or who own wells. Zuarob had gone to his son’s house, about half a mile away, to fill up on water.

Zuarob’s wife, Terese Zuarob, 55, stored the 17 half-gallon bottles and two half-gallon water coolers under a small table in the kitchen along a windowsill. On the floor next to the bottles was a six-pack of half-gallon bottles of mineral water used to mix baby formula for their 1-year-old granddaughter. The baby and her parents live with the couple.

“People never say anything when you ask them for water; they even like to help. Still, you can’t help but feel embarrassed,” said Terese Zuarob. “But what can we do?”

The Abed Rabbo household - which has three people as opposed to the five living in the Zuarob home - was lucky that July day. Abed Rabbo, 51, still had some water left in her water tanks although the neighborhood had not received any water from the Beit Jalla municipality for two weeks.

Her husband said the distribution system could be better organized, as in Jordan, where people are notified they will be having water service so they can prepare.

The Beit Jalla municipality, which depends on the Palestinian Authority water company and the Israeli water company for its water supply, tries to rotate its water service to the different neighborhoods when there is water, said Mayor Raji Zeidan.

Abed Rabbo said the water shortage has had an effect on social customs.

“We used to get together every morning with some other women of the neighborhood for our morning coffee,” she said. “Now everyone drinks their coffee in their own homes so nobody has to wash too many cups.”

She noted that Palestinian women are very fastidious about cleaning their homes, and when there is water all the women go into a frenzy of cleaning before the water runs out.

Cooking, doing laundry and showering present problems when there is no water, she said. Abed Rabbo takes her laundry to her parents, who have a well; Zuarob family members divide their laundry and showers among the homes of family members.

They decline invitations to baptisms and weddings because they can't take showers, said Zuarob's daughter-in-law, Rababa.

“We are really depressed and we quarrel. I don't like people to come over to visit,” she said. “The house is dirty. We don't have enough water to serve coffee and, if we do serve coffee, we have to use plastic cups so we don't have to wash all the cups afterward.”

That morning before going to work her husband had tried to wash, she said. He used bottled water and as he left the house his hair was sticking up in the back, she said, but he was so frustrated he did not even care.