

40,000 lack water

DIRE STRAITS: As dam empties and taps run dry for days, Mersing folk want end to suffering

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SOME 40,000 people here have been facing severe water supply shortage for the past five months due to a severe drought.

Residents claim they have been suffering from hot and dry weather for the past two years, which has caused the main water source in the Mersing district, Congok dam, to dry up.

A check by the *New Straits Times* revealed that the base of the dam was visible, with cracked soil in some parts.

There were only pools of water in the dam, barely enough for a pontoon pump to draw water to be channelled to the Tenglu water treatment plant.

Johor water utility company SAJ Holdings recently imposed its fifth round of scheduled water supply rationing in Mersing since March.

There will now be a shorter period in which the water supply is "turned on" every third day.

The most hard-hit residents are those operating eateries, car washes, laundromats and those who live on higher ground.

Restaurant operator Nita Halini Mohamed, 40, said her business has gone through a slump as the water supply situation went from bad to worse in the past several months.

"We thought the water rationing in Mersing would be temporary as other areas in Johor which had water rationing saw their water supply return to normal after several months.

"But that has not been the case here. Mersing folk still have to live with dry taps."

Nita said she would collect up to 20 buckets of water a day for consumption at home and at her eatery.

"Without ample water, it is hard to maintain the business as water is used for cooking, making drinks, washing and cleaning," she said.

A car wash operator, who only wanted to be known as Ravi, said he faced difficulties maintaining his business.

"Whatever water I collect every third day is not enough to operate my car wash, even for one entire day," he said.

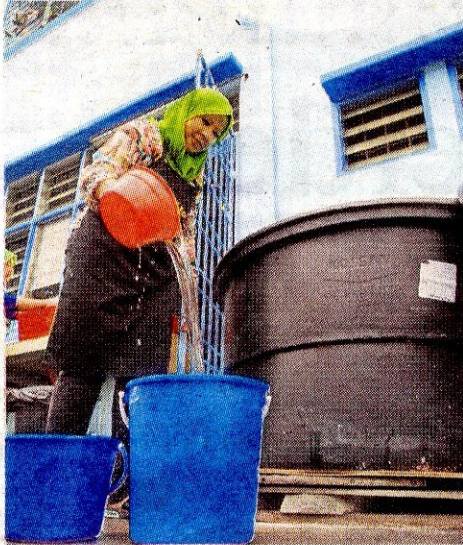
Kampung Benaung resident Razila Affandi, 25, said residents in her neighbourhood were forced to collect water from SAJ water tankers because the water coming out of their house taps was not enough.

"We are allowed to take up to 100 litres a day during collection days, which is a daunting task," she said.

Razila said she had been told that SAJ had reduced the duration to stock up water to only six hours every third day.

"I hope the state government knows about the plight of Mersing folk, who are facing a serious water shortage. They must immediately take action to ease the people's suffering," she said.

SAJ operations general manager for production and distribution Elias Ismail said



(Top) The bottom of Congok dam in Mersing, Johor, is exposed to the elements. (Left) Razila Affandi filling a pail with water from a holding tank. Pix by Mohd Azren Jamaludin

the water level at Congok dam was at 2.5m, which is much lower than its critical level of 3.5m.

"With the remaining level of water at the dam, it is only a matter of days before the pontoon pump can no longer draw water," he said.

"The dam dried up due to the drought that has severely affected Mersing. There has hardly been any rainfall here in the past few years," he said.

However, he said, the Tenglu water treatment plant would continue operating as water in reserve tanks could still be distributed through its supply network.

The Tenglu water treatment plant partially supplies treated water to 8,200 accounts, or more than 40,000 users in Mersing.

The water distribution system is backed up by another SAJ-managed facility, the Sungai Mersing water treatment plant, located 25km away.

SAJ operates five water treatment plants in Endau, Tenglu, Felda Nita, Tenggara and Sungai Mersing. Each facility sources its raw water from tributaries except for Congok dam, which relies on rainwater.

Page 1 pic: The water level markers at Congok dam exposed to the air. The dam relies on rainwater to replenish its supply.

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