

## 'Russian Party' drops river diversion plan

by Luba George

A multi-billion-ruble project to divert the northern rivers of the U.S.S.R. southward, where they would irrigate the dry regions populated largely by Muslims, will be postponed, the deputy chief of the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) announced at the 27th Party Congress in Moscow. The river-diversion scheme has long been opposed by the "Russian Party" now in power in the Kremlin, and its moth-balling signals a consolidation of that power.

For the Russian chauvinists who put Mikhail Gorbachov in power, there is no need to spend scarce resources to benefit non-Russian populations. Instead, the emphasis is on relocating those populations to areas of extreme labor shortage, to help with the war-economy build-up.

The cancellation of the river-diversion project fits in with the economic guidelines approved unanimously by the Party Congress for the 12th Five Year Plan and the next 15 years, to prioritize investment in the modernization of existing industry and agriculture, and confining new large-scale investments to Siberia, the Soviet Far East, and the northern part of European Russia.

The project was mentioned in the original draft Five-Year Plan, which has now been scrapped. It would have dug channels to divert water from the Onega and Dvina rivers into the Volga, which flows south into the Caspian Sea. The reason given by Gosplan Deputy Chief Leonid Vid was: "The water level of the Caspian Sea is no longer falling."

Another ambitious scheme—an essential element of the Brezhnev-era "food program"—to take water from the Irtysh and Ob rivers by means of a 1,500-mile canal to the plains of Uzbekistan in Central Asia, fell out of favor after Mikhail Gorbachov came to power last year. It was not mentioned in the new Five-Year Plan. Despite the fact that Uzbekistan and four other Soviet republics in Central Asia heavily depend on irrigation, the project was attacked by Gorbachov's "economic reformers" and other "Russian Party" chauvinistic environmentalists as "wasteful" and "damaging."

The fate of the northern rivers project was already sealed in February, when the project was attacked in the official Party daily newspaper *Pravda* by Gorbachov's chief economic adviser and architect of Moscow's new 15-year economic modernization program, Abel Aganbegyan. He ar-

gued that the project was not "cost effective" and that the money required would be much better spent on "soil improvement schemes in traditional farming areas."

Aganbegyan was transferred to Moscow recently on orders from Gorbachov, from his post as director of a Siberian think tank, the Institute of the Economy and Organization of Industrial Production. This is the Novosibirsk command center for scientific and modernization programs central to the Soviet defense build-up.

### The Muslim populations

Mikhail Gorbachov has shown little enthusiasm for grandiose irrigation projects, especially when the regions to benefit the most by them would be the non-Russian, largely Muslim areas undergoing so-called demographic explosions.

Any severe drought in these regions, where local water sources are already seriously depleted, Soviet analysts admit, would force the Muslim populations to relocate—to Siberia, for example, where the war economy drive suffers from severe labor shortage.

Given the Soviet Union's war economy mobilization requirements, the problem of the labor shortage was underscored at the Party Congress in a speech by Aganbegyan. He said that the Soviet labor force, because of the "long-term demographic impact of the war," is growing "very slowly." It has increased by 10 million over the past five years, but would rise by only 3.2 million over the next five. Much of this increase will be in Central Asia—away from the key industrial regions of the country.

A spate of recent articles in the Russian Republic's newspaper *Sovietskaya Rossiya* stressed the need to relocate at least one million workers and their families from Russia and the Ukraine into Siberia during the current Five-Year Plan (1986-90).

The Muslim republics are being told to make do with what they have and concentrate on "upgrading" their present industrial and agricultural capacities. It was striking that Gorbachov, during his keynote speech at the Party Congress, singled out the Muslim republics for economic "mismanagement." The Muslim Communist Party leadership of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan—the two largest republics—received the brunt of the attacks. Starting in November, in the build-up to the Party Congress, a massive purge swept out most of the party leadership in the Muslim republics, including three first secretaries from Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan, and Kirghisia.

The catastrophic decline of the Russian birth rate, and the explosion of non-Russian, especially Muslim, populations in the Soviet Union, are uppermost among Gorbachov's concerns. When asked in a recent interview with the French Communist Party newspaper *L'Humanité* which problems in the Soviet Union he considers most significant, he answered: "the demographic situation of the Russian population."