

THE PEOPLE

Fair, Frank and Fearless **Daily**

What happened to water policy?

FROM the look of things, it is only now that the government is realising the importance of a national water policy. If we have one, then it did not foresee a situation wherein the government would be unable to satisfy the water requirements of a fast growing population.

But it is much more than that. The way things stand, it is as if we have no water policy at all. No wonder that we have water problems in areas surrounding Lake Victoria, the largest fresh water lake in Africa and second largest in the world.

According to the minister for natural resources and water development, Kipng'eno arap Ng'eny, the government is in the process of formulating a water policy that will involve the private sector and small-scale service providers in the provision and sustainable use of water.

These are sensible steps indeed and it is surprising that we did not think about them before. Now that we are about to remove that hurdle, can the minister tell Kenyans whether the new bill will incorporate the all-important aspect of water use for agricultural production?

All in all, the international workshop on water and sanitation to which the minister was revealing the country's intention comes at a crucial time when the country is facing a two-pronged crisis that involves water.

The lesser evil is electricity. We call it lesser not because it is not important but because people can use other means such as lamps to light their houses. However, the fact that dams that generate electricity have run dry calls for a serious examination of Kenya's attitude towards the resource.

The more pressing issue, however, is the provision of clean drinking water. Even if the government was unable to provide water to all homesteads in the country, there was no reason why it could not make a stab at providing water to all urban homesteads.

And again when the government is talking about involving the private sector and the small-scale service providers, there is no doubt that the situation is that water is already there and the main problem is how to make it available to the consumers.

It is important that this point is made clear because you cannot talk of providing something that is not there. We are sure the government is talking of a situation where it will construct and maintain dams and reservoirs.

If this is the case, then we are correct in reminding the government what we have said repeatedly in this column: That it must enhance and protect water catchment areas.

One of the biggest problems in this country is a government that is blind to its obligations, a government that is shortsighted and that does not seriously consider the implications of its actions. It is a government that watches tree felling and even dishes out forests as if they are a nuisance.

What kind of a water policy would one expect from such a government? How can we be sure that a government that is unable to provide clean drinking water even knows that there is a direct connection between water and sanitation?