

Long hot summer ahead

Bahrija protest



Bathing water quality at Ghadira and over 80 monitored sites in Malta are compliant with EU rules.

Someone thought it fit to jump the gun and predict my no-show at the Bahrija Valley protest last week. Such a forecast misfired in spectacular fashion as it was based on the warped idea that once an individual is tainted politically, he/she will have to toe the party line faithfully on all issues.

The bearer of the placard failed to realise that my commitment towards the preservation of hamlets like Bahrija dates back almost a decade. It will not fizzle away simply because the applicant in this case happens to be a high-ranking official within the PN.

Time bomb

The report that about one quarter of the world's daily oil needs (20 million barrels) are currently being stored offshore Malta in six crude oil tankers, 20 oil product tankers and six liquefied natural gas (LNG) tankers caused little more than a ripple in the media despite its possible negative implications.

Some of the tankers have been parked there as since early May. What has effectively been termed as the world's highest density of anchored tankers outside ports could well be considered as an albatross around our neck because of the potential for a massive oil spill.

We are sitting on a time bomb and the situation is the result of the current economic downturn with the global demand for oil products plummeting. This has convinced operators that it makes sense to sit out the current dry phase by parking tankers in relatively mellow conditions in the central Mediterranean in close proximity to major ports of call so as to grasp the opportunities once they arise.

But such opportunities are probably months away since they usually coincide with winter heating demands. This calls for greater investment in forecasting tools such as oil spill modelling developed by the Physical Oceanography Unit at University.

We also need contingency plans in the case of an oil spill and regular monitoring by local authorities.

Qatargas CEO Faisal Mohammed Al-Suwaidi said last May the company had used the waters around Malta to park some of the tankers for short periods but that he did not see offshore LNG storage there as a likely trend.

Is it safe to swim?

The annual bathing water report presented by the European Commission and the European Environment Agency says that the large majority of bathing sites across the European Union met EU hygiene standards in 2008.

The overall quality of bathing waters in the EU has improved markedly since 1990. Compliance with mandatory values (minimum quality requirements) increased since 1990 from 80 to 96 per cent and from 52 to 92 per cent in coastal and inland waters respectively. From 2007 to 2008, compliance increased both for inland and coastal waters.

To determine their quality, bathing waters are tested against a number of physical, chemical and microbiological parameters for which the Bathing Water Directive sets out mandatory values. Member states must comply with the mandatory values but may adopt the stricter standards and non-binding guide values.

In 2006, a new bathing water directive took effect, which updated the parameters and monitoring provisions in line with the latest scientific knowledge.

The new directive places greater emphasis on providing information to the public on the quality of bathing areas.

Member states have until 2015 to fully implement the new directive but 12 member states already monitored their bathing areas during the 2008 bathing season according to the parameters of the new directive. Malta has yet to fully implement it. Eighty-seven sites within local waters are monitored regularly for their bathing water quality. While in 2005, just 29 and 35 sites were compliant with guide and mandatory values respectively, last year the respective values were 82 and 86 respectively, with just one site being non-compliant.

Water Information System for Europe (www.water.europa.eu) is a gateway to all water-related information. Information on bathing water quality can be found through interactive maps and graphs (www.eea.europa.eu/themes/water/status-and-monitoring/state-of-bathing-water).

Beach access

A hectic summer is on the cards for the Government Property Division under the helm of Parliamentary Secretary Jason Azzopardi. Among the bones of contention the division has to tackle, three are noteworthy:

- Beach concessions: Despite attempts each year to address this issue, each summer we witness the brazen colonisation of coveted beach space by unscrupulous operators, and any action taken seems to be ad hoc, with no lasting solution in sight;
- Campers and caravans: After the much publicised eviction of the Gnejna caravans, authorities are striving to earmark possible alternatives. An application has been submitted for a caravan site at Żonqor in Marsascula while persistent reports indicate the environs of Anchor Bay, close to Popeye Village, as the next possibility. The latter lies within the precincts of the Majjistral Park, which is designated as a Special Area of Conservation.

No mention is being made of St Thomas Bay, which is a de facto caravan site with no formal designation whatsoever and where regulation is conspicuous by its absence. Will this site be vacated as well? Similarly, campers occupy for months on end beaches along the L-Ahrax promontory, such as White Tower Bay, stifling the protected sand dune on site with their paraphernalia and restricting beach space available to the public.

- Access to Fomm ir-Riĥ: Azzopardi has once again given cause for hope when he announced that the Land Department and the owner's legal representative are to meet next week to 'amicably' discuss access to Fomm ir-Riĥ.

The ODZ mill

Flitting through 110 ODZ applications submitted during the month of May, a number of well-established trends continue to emerge:

- The current gallop for stables: Three other applications for stables have been submitted in May for a site in Marsascula, Mġarr (Malta) and Qala, and another three for the sanctioning of illegally developed stables in Għajnsielem and Qala.
- The agricultural sector is the largest source of sanctioning applications, with calls to sanction tool sheds, pump rooms or stores galore.
- The number of applications for dwellings in ODZ areas seems to be cooling off: Only two applications for new residences in ODZ areas have been submitted, in Victoria and in Rabat.
- Calls to extend existing quarries: Applications have been submitted for the extension of the no. 32 hardstone quarry in Masraĥ Suffara, Rabat, quarry no. 81 in Siġġiewi, and quarry no. 5 in Għargħur.
- Triq Grunju in Qala wins the dubious award for the largest number of ODZ applications in a single batch. Four ODZ applications originate from this modest street in Gozo, two for the sanctioning of stables and two for the sanctioning of a swimming pool and alterations to a dwelling.
- Within the same month, the outline application for the offshore wind farm at Sikka l-Bajda and the on-land wind farms at Wied Rini in Baħrija and at Ħal Far industrial estate were also submitted.