

The structure of the country creates an unusual phenomenon in the form of rivers flowing South from the southerly flanks of the mountains into the Sahara, drying up gradually until they completely disappear. A great many "Oueds" of this nature are to be seen, although most of the year they are but dried river beds with little if any vegetation around them. Even the streams running North into the Mediterranean merely trickle in a feeble manner in the summertime, but during the height of the winter rains they are of torrential proportions, and bring down enormous quantities of alluvial soil washed away from the already meagre surface of the land. There are only four important rivers running into the Mediterranean -- the Seybouse, the Rummel, the Chelif and the Bou Sellam. An effort is being made to harness all these streams, for hydro-electric power as well as for irrigation purposes. However, the evaporation problem is serious in the summertime, and even the largest dams may hold water only to have it slowly disappear during the hot summer months.

Communications throughout the country are difficult because of the series of mountain ranges which have to be traversed. Generally speaking, East to West communications are generally easier than North to South, and as a result the main railway line has been built parallel to the coast, with occasional feeders crossing the surrounding mountains from the next valleys or plateaux. There are in addition three good East to West roads, which join with similar systems in Morocco and Tunisia. The ports are in most cases isolated by surrounding mountains, and the main railway line cannot go directly through them all, although Algiers and Oran are on the main line.

The economy of the country is essentially based on water. Frugality with respect to water has been an immemorial custom with the Arab populations, but their primitive means of obtaining it are not sufficient to permit of a stable agricultural economy. For this reason, much must be done if the wide and relatively fertile areas of the country are to be exploited to their full extent. There are some irrigated zones, and plans call for a very great expansion in the irrigated area, in order to care for a growing population without having recourse to continued imports of basic food-stuffs. This will be treated at greater length in Chapter Three.

The second problem with which the country is faced is that of power and fuel. Generally speaking, the rivers of Algeria are too short to permit of great expansion in hydro-electric resources. Although many new projects are on the drawing board, it may be safe to assert that in the long run electricity must be produced by thermal plants, with hydro-electric plants acting as stand-by producers, relieving the load at such times as the water flow is at its height. This is the reverse of the situation in Morocco, where conditions are favourable for the establishment of large hydro power stations,