

Real and Outstanding Developments Related to the Nile

As experts from Sudan, Ethiopia and Egypt met to discuss an under-construction Ethiopian hydropower project, a Wikileaks report stated that Egyptian authorities reached an agreement with Khartoum to build an airbase in Sudan, to launch attacks on Ethiopian dam facilities.

Although denied by Cairo, the information allegedly from the Texas-based global intelligence company, Stratfor, is a stark reminder of the high stakes involved in Nile Basin politics. The reason is the vital importance of the Nile to Egypt and the threat it sees from a more assertive stance from upstream nations, particularly a resurgent Ethiopia.

As the Greek philosopher and historian, Herodotus, declared, Egypt has the 'gift' of the Nile. This 'gift' has made it easy for Egyptians to produce agricultural products in fertile soil near areas where much of the country consists of dry desert land.

The river has played an extremely important role in the civilization, life and history of Egypt. The most important benefit of the Nile is its fertile soil that is transported from the highlands of Ethiopia, which contributes more than 85 percent of the river's water.

According to reports Wikileaks has leaked which quote the Egyptian ambassador to Lebanon said in 2010 his nation would do anything to prevent the secession of South Sudan - which became independent last year - because of the political implications it will have for Egypt's access to the Nile.

This leak was released as a ten-member committee of experts and professionals from Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia began to discuss the possible impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which started to be built around 30 kilometers from the Sudanese border in April 2011

At 6,650 kilometers, the Nile is the longest river in the world. The White Nile rises in the Great Lakes region, with its source in Burundi. It passes through Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and South Sudan. The Blue Nile starts at Lake Tana in Ethiopia and flows through Khartoum where the two rivers meet on their way to Egypt. The Nile region is home to more than 160 million people, growing at 2–3% per year.

Many upper Nile countries have accused Egypt of mismanagement of the river and of preventing them from development projects. Egypt argues that it has historic veto power on the basis of the agreements of the colonial-era in 1929 and 1959, even though no water-producing country in the upper basin region was consulted during the process.

The 1929 agreement was signed between Britain and Egypt. In order to incorporate Sudan, the 1959 agreement was signed between Egypt and newly-independent Sudan to allocate 55.5 billion cubic metres (bcm) of water for Egypt and 18.5 bcm for Sudan. The result is that Ethiopia, the main source of the Nile, is permitted to use only 1 bcm.

In 1999, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was established by riparian countries to develop the river in a cooperative manner. Its members are Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, the Democratic Republic Congo, Burundi and Rwanda, with Eritrea as an observer.

The NBI did not achieve tangible progress until 2010, when four of its members met in Kampala to sign the Comprehensive Framework Agreement (CFA) treaty. The host country, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Ethiopia signed, followed shortly by Kenya. Burundi signed the CFA in February 2011. The move was considered as a protest against the 1929 and 1959 agreements that gave Egypt and Sudan rights to use 90 per cent of the Nile's water.

The new stance partly stems from almost all upper basin countries registering significant economic growth and relative stability. For example, Ethiopia, which contributes more than 85 percent of the water of the Blue Nile, claims double-digit economic growth in the past decade. The country needs to exploit unused water resources, including the Nile, to sustain this growth.

Most of the upper-riparian countries would also like to use the river to generate hydroelectric power and for irrigated agriculture. Current electricity shortages throughout the region threaten to hold back economies.

In April 2011, Ethiopia announced its plan to build the 6,000 megawatt Renaissance dam.. The reservoir will be the largest water-body in Ethiopia, with a capacity of 63 billion cubic meters water, twice the size of the largest natural lake in, Lake Tana. At the launch for the project, the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said it would cost about 80 billion Birr (about 4.8 Billion

USD) that would be covered domestically. This was because Egypt had successfully lobbied against Ethiopia receiving access to external loans and grants. Uganda and South Sudan followed with plans for the same kind of hydro-electric development on the White Nile River in South Sudan.

The decision to begin utilizing the Nile should allow Ethiopia - which has up to 5.7 million hectares of potentially irrigable land, of which 2.3 million hectares is in the main Blue Nile basin - to add to the 160,000 hectares currently being irrigated.

In order to negotiate his country's 'right' to Nile river resources, the former Egyptian transitional government Prime Minister, Essam Sharaf, visited South Sudan last year and pledged to extend support and assistance to that future country. Another delegation travelled to Uganda and met with President Yoweri Museveni to convince him not to reduce the flow of the river. It does not seem that the efforts heralded much success.

However, it can be argued that, the new Egyptian government is partially succeeding in strengthening cooperation with upper riparian countries, in contrast to the actions of the former Mubarak government.

In late April 2011, a 48-member Egyptian delegation, including three presidential candidates, visited Ethiopia and discussed the Nile issue with several officials including Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Both sides said the meeting was fruitful and represented a cornerstone for future cooperation. The unexpected benefit for the visiting delegations was that Ethiopia agreed to postpone the ratification of the new CFA treaty.

In return, the late Ethiopian Prime Minister visited Egypt in September and agreed to create the trilateral committee to look at the new dam project. During his visit Meles met with several former top officials including Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, Commander in Chief and Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Prime Minister Essam Sharaf and several officials and businessmen. The visit was considered an important step in strengthening the relationship.

However, if Egyptians really want to achieve a lasting 'win-win' solution it must commit itself to negotiate and discuss Nile water usage with upper basin countries on the basis of mutual

trust and respect. One area of concern for Ethiopia and its allies is that the unused water that regularly evaporates from Egypt's poorly planned Aswan dam is estimated to exceed 10 bcm per annum.

Egypt and Sudan should offer assistance on upper basin projects, using their better experience and capacity. In addition, the international community needs to offer to mediate disagreements and build the capacity and autonomy of the Nile Basin Initiative.

Such efforts will hopefully mean that contingency plans for air strikes on Ethiopian dams remain unused on the desks of Egyptian military planners.

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The following is an article posted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website:
<http://www.mfa.gov.et/pressMore.php?pg=44>

Article

Misguided fear or deliberate distortion in the Nile Basin again?

The Egyptian State Information Service (as quoted on allAfrica.com) reported a statement by Dr. Mohammed Baha el Dien, Minister of Water and Irrigation of Egypt, on October 15th. The Minister is quoted as saying "Egypt does not stand in the way of any development project as long as it does not infringe on its rights to the Nile water". There was a similar statement by the Minister on September 22nd when he said that "Egypt is still having concerns about the construction of Ethiopia's dam due to its quantum storage capacity." The Minister added that "the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry assured Egypt and Sudan that in case there was any impact on their water quota due to the dam other projects will be carried out to collect lost water and cover shortage."

It is indeed disappointing that there seems to be no end to unhelpful Egyptian statements over the use of the Nile waters in general and the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in particular despite the improved and encouraging bilateral relations between Ethiopia and Egypt.

It should have been clear by now that the Nile basin countries have amicably adopted the principle of equitable utilization of the waters of the Nile. This principle has guided the cooperation process through the Nile Basin Initiative, the Cooperative Framework Agreement, Joint Multipurpose Projects and other matters. Furthermore, the Nile

Cooperative Framework Agreement unequivocally establishes water security of the Nile for all riparian countries without exception.

It has long been crystal clear that no riparian state in the Nile Basin can claim a monopoly of the waters of the Nile. Neither Egypt nor any other riparian country in the Nile Basin can afford anymore to be guided by false assumptions that they have exclusive rights to the Nile waters. Nor can they allow themselves to be haunted by perception of fears that have no basis or even by any deliberate distortions. By any standards, and in every case, the rights of any and all riparian country cannot now be infringed. All of them have an inalienable right to equitable utilization of the waters of the Nile.

To take the current situation: Egypt and Sudan graciously accepted Ethiopia's offer to establish an International Panel of Experts (IPoE) to help address the whole issue of downstream impact, if any, relating to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The IPoE, made up of six experts, two each from Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan as well as another four independent international authorities is fully engaged in the task as defined in its agreed Terms of Reference.