



GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM DISCORD BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND EGYPT

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The longstanding conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has intensified recently. Ethiopia is building a hydropower project on Nile's tributary which is ringing alarm bells for Egypt due to its great dependence on the downstream waters of the river.¹

To settle the issue between countries, in month of February 2020 United States along with the World Bank drafted a proposal with reference to the filling and construction of this dam.² Core objective of the proposal was to settle issues related to the annual release of water from Nile through the dam to downstream countries such as Egypt and Sudan; filling of the reservoir and operation of the GERD.³

However, the proposal was rejected by Ethiopia, on the grounds that such an agreement will compel it to drain the reservoir to really low level in case of a drought. Moreover, it was also announced by Ethiopia that it will start filling the reservoir by month of July 2020 even if parties fail to reach a settlement (First Phase will fill in 4.9 cubic meter of water).⁴ On the other hand, Egypt claims that

¹ Mutahi, Basillioh. "Egypt-Ethiopia Row: The Trouble over a Giant Nile Dam", *BBC News*. BBC, January 13, 2020. Accessed May 31, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50328647>.

² "OPINION: Does Ethiopia Want to Resolve the Grand Renaissance Dam Crisis?", *Egypt Today*, April 16, 2020. Accessed May 31, 2020. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/84787/OPINION-Does-Ethiopia-want-to-resolve-the-Grand-Renaissance-Dam>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Ethiopia Will Begin Filling up Renaissance Dam's Reservoir", *Ethiopia Monitor* Accessed May 31, 2020. <https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2020/04/02/we-will-begin-filling-up-renaissance-dams-reservoir-in-july-abiy-asserts/>.

the reservoir can only be filled after the agreement and has pledged to use all possible means to protect its water interests.⁵ US Treasury Department has also warned Ethiopia that any move by Ethiopia regarding filling of the dam will be considered a violation of the international legal principle which allows states to take all precautionary measures to avoid harm and allows other watercourse countries to use a trans-boundary river resource, in accordance with the UN convention of 1997.

Construction over GERD began in 2010 and since that time it has remained a source of friction between Egypt and Ethiopia. According to the former President of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, "Construction of this dam is very crucial for the country and it will not only benefit Ethiopia but it will benefit the entire region including Egypt. It will be a great source of cheap electricity to Egypt."⁶ Ethiopia also rejects claims of Egypt regarding its historical rights to the Nile Waters, and calls old treaties outdated.⁷ According to these treaties, upstream countries are not a party which is unfair and illegitimate. Ethiopia and other upstream nations want the Nile basin to be governed by a new trans-boundary cooperation framework.⁸

However, things are quite different for Egypt. A total of 55.5 billion cubic meter (bcm) annual was allocated to Egypt under the 1959 pact between Egypt and Sudan.⁹ Sometimes it gets more than 55.5 bcm because Sudan does not use its whole allocation. Egypt is heavily dependent on the river waters for agricultural and municipal needs, while one tenth of its electricity is being generated by the river water. Egypt is also concerned that successful implementation of GERD will pave the way for other upstream Nile nations to initiate more irrigation and hydropower projects. Nile's status is a matter of existential importance for Egypt and Article 44 of country's constitution gives it the right to preserve the "historical rights" to the river.¹⁰

Since GERD is coming closer to its completion phase, the situation is becoming more complex. Egypt has taken the complaint against Ethiopia to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on May 1.¹¹

⁵ Mutahi, Basillioh. "Egypt-Ethiopia Row: The Trouble over a Giant Nile Dam", *BBC News*, January 13, 2020. Accessed May 31, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50328647>.

⁶ "Egypt Warns Ethiopia over Nile Dam", *Al Jazeera*, April 11, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/06/201361144413214749.html>.

⁷ "Egypt's Nile Monopoly Is over", *Ethiopia Insight*, Accessed May 31, 2020. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/04/09/egypts-nile-monopoly-is-over/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "The Nile River: Treaties, Facts and Figures", *Reuters*, July 9, 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-nile-fb-idUSTRE76742R20110709>.

¹⁰ Rashad, Jonathan. "The World's Longest River Is in Trouble", *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theworldpost/wp/2018/03/22/egypt/>.

¹¹ Lutessa, Jemal, and Ahmed Kiyar. "Egypt Lodged Complaints to the Security Council, Ethiopia Says Will Not Give up Its Right", *Borkena Ethiopian News*, May 7, 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/05/06/egypt-complaints-security-councilethiopia-says-will-not-give-up-its-right/>.

Egypt has accused Ethiopia of diverting the waters of river in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, 15 km east of the border with Sudan.¹² On the other side, Ethiopia is ready to respond to the complaint and has assailed Egypt for taking the matter to the UNSC instead of resolving it through regional blocks such as the African Union (AU). Prime Minister of Ethiopia has sought intervention of the current chairperson of AU, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa to mediate between the countries to settle the water issue.¹³

To resolve this issue, the International Crisis Group (ICG) had suggested a number of steps to avoid any escalation. According to William Davison, ICG Advisor for Ethiopia, the move by Egypt taking matter to the UNSC is another way of putting pressure on Ethiopia to sign the deal. Ethiopia is not ready to reverse its position. Instead of this, Egypt should look for a trilateral process which might help the three countries.¹⁴ Moreover, if parties fail to broker a deal over the long-term, they should sign a deal for first two years regarding filling of the dam. This will help to set the foundation for future agreement. However, this idea regarding the initial filling of dam has been rejected by both Egypt and Sudan.

Conclusively, this crisis must be resolved before any serious escalation although at this stage it seems very difficult. Moreover, if they are unable to sign a long-term agreement, a temporary understanding could be reached. They should allow Ethiopia to at least fill the reservoirs for initial testing of the turbines (which will include the 18.4 bcm of water in two years). To win Cairo's support, such a deal would need to include an explicit Ethiopian pledge to finalize a comprehensive accord prior to embarking on subsequent stages of filling. This would be in spirit of commitments made by Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan in the 2015 Declaration of Principles on the GERD that the parties would strike an agreement on filling before impounding commences.¹⁵

Such a deal would benefit all parties. It will give some time to the parties to draw comprehensive and long-term plans to avoid any confrontation in future. Parties will have enough time to make any institutional framework such as joint ministerial committee which will help to look after and monitor the information on river flow and rainfalls. Such an agreement will be challenging, but the parties should understand that without careful management of the Nile water dispute, Ethiopia and Egypt

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Chianza, Takudzwa Hillary. "Nile Dam Crisis: Ethiopian PM Asks Ramaphosa To Intervene in the Dispute", *The African Exponent*. The African Exponent, January 13, 2020. <https://www.africanexponent.com/post/6609-abiy-ahmed-asks-ramaphosa-to-intervene-in-nile-dam-crisis>.

¹⁴ "Nile Dam Talks: Unlocking a Dangerous Stalemate", *Crisis Group*. Accessed May 31, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/nile-dam-talks-unlocking-dangerous-stalemate>.

¹⁵ "A Brief Comment on Current GERD Political Crisis (Dawit Giorgis)", *Borkena*, Accessed May 31, 2020. <https://borkena.com/2020/05/22/dawit-giorgis-commentary-on-current-gerd-political-crisis/>.

would move towards a serious confrontation. Sudan, in the midst of its delicate political transition, would be dragged into the fray as well. Instead of walking this path, all parties should work to defuse tensions and should understand that an interim agreement is important for peace, security and well-being of all those who live in the Nile basin.