

## The stormy waters of the Nile

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Over the past weeks, tensions escalated between Egypt and Ethiopia after Addis Ababa withdrew from the latest round of US-sponsored discussions to resolve the dispute, and pledged to start filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) before reaching a final deal with the downstream countries of Egypt and Sudan. Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan were expected to sign a final deal on the dam during the two-day talks that concluded in Washington in late February 2020.<sup>1</sup>

The construction of the GERD has been a source of tension between Ethiopia and Egypt for some years. The dam construction, begun in 2011, is due for completion in this year. It will hold a massive 74 billion cubic meters of water and will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa. Egypt expressed concerns that the dam might reduce its share of Nile water.

Egypt relies heavily on the Nile River for its main source of water. The River Nile is the backbone of Egypt's industrial and agricultural sector and is the primary source of drinking water for the population. Egypt has been suffering from severe water scarcity in recent years. Egypt is facing an annual water deficit of around 7 billion cubic meters and the United Nations is already warning that Egypt could run out of water by the year 2025.<sup>2</sup>

Ethiopia argues that there will be no reduction of water downstream, as all the Blue Nile water will be cycled through the dam and eventually reach the downstream countries on its way to the Mediterranean. It also claims that more water will be available overall because there will be less evaporation.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main issues in debate is the time of filling the reservoir. Egypt and Sudan will be especially vulnerable to the time frame of filling the reservoir, which may take anywhere from three to seven years. Addis Ababa originally wanted to fill the reservoir in three years which would have seen Egypt's share of Nile water fall drastically. Egypt is pushing for a seven-year filling timetable.<sup>4</sup>

The shorter the time taken the quicker Ethiopia can begin producing electricity, but this will also mean an aggressive throttling of water flow downstream. Once the dam is filled the flow should stabilize downstream as it will reach a point where Ethiopia cannot contain it any longer.<sup>5</sup>

Another main issue in dispute is the annual release of water. Egypt had not been willing to concede to an annual release below 40 billion cubic meters per year. Ethiopia, however, has pushed for an annual release of 31 billion cubic meters. The US is now pressuring both Egypt and Ethiopia to compromise and agree to an annual release of 37 billion cubic meters from the Blue Nile.<sup>6</sup>

While negotiations around the annual water share have all centered on an initial temporary period during which the GERD reservoir will be filled, Ethiopia is looking to have the 37 billion cubic meters become the permanent share of water it releases annually even after the filling period. This prospect is unacceptable to Egypt and is a major source of contention, the consultant says.<sup>7</sup>

When tripartite talks reached deadlock in October 2019, the US Department of the Treasury stepped in to act as an observer of negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan. But after the second round of negotiations the US has shifted from observer to power broker. The three countries agreed to entrust the US with preparing an agreement on the filling and operation of the GERD based on provisions proposed by the legal and technical teams of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan and with the technical input of the World Bank.

The US drew a roadmap for the talks which were supposed to conclude by mid-January 2020 but the deadline was subsequently pushed to the end of February 2020.<sup>8</sup> A draft deal prepared by the US Treasury Department on the mechanism of filling and operating the GERD has been sent to Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia, to be considered ahead of the next round of negotiations.<sup>9</sup>

Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan agreed to meet in Washington in 27-28 February 2020, to sign the final deal on the disputed dam, however Ethiopia said it would not take part in the final round of talks because “outstanding issues” still needed to be settled.<sup>10</sup>

The US Secretary of the Treasury, Steven Mnuchin, participated in separate bilateral meetings with the foreign affairs and water resources ministers of Egypt and Sudan in Washington. The ministers provided their comments on the agreement, which the US described as one that “addresses all issues in a balanced and equitable manner, taking into account the interests of the three countries.”<sup>11</sup>

Mnuchin said he is looking forward to Ethiopia finalizing its national consultations “as soon as possible to provide for the signing of the agreement at the earliest possible time,” after Egypt initialed the agreement as a sign of commitment.<sup>12</sup>

## **Ethiopia**

Under a new 2015-2020 development plan, Addis Ababa wants to rise power generation to 17,346 MW from a current capacity of just over 4,300 MW from hydropower, wind and geothermal sources and aims to become the continent's biggest power exporter.<sup>13</sup>

At a press briefing on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in Addis Ababa on March 4, 2020, Foreign Affairs Minister Gedu Andargachew said that “Ethiopia has full rights to its own natural resources to extricate citizens out of poverty.” Andargachew said Ethiopia would stick with the US-facilitated talks but warned Washington not to rush the process or try to influence the outcome. Ethiopia’s official news agency continued that Andargachew stated that “the country is building the dam in such a way as to not cause a significant harm to the downstream countries.”<sup>14</sup>

Ethiopia said that it doesn't accept the "characterization" that negotiations on the Guidelines and Rules on the First Filling and Annual Operation of the GERD are completed.<sup>15</sup>

However, Ethiopia affirmed its committed to continue its engagement with Egypt and Sudan to address the outstanding issues and finalize the Guidelines and Rules on the first filling and annual operation of the GERD.

Ethiopia recalled its ambassador to Egypt earlier in March 2020, with the country's Foreign Ministry stating that the decision has nothing to do with the GERD dispute. The spokesperson for Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nebiat Getachew explained that this is simply a routine procedure Addis Ababa performs from time to time, as some ambassadors have completed their four-year work period.<sup>16</sup>

### **Egypt**

Cairo fears the dam will diminish its water supply from the Nile, on which it relies for the vast majority of its fresh water.

Egypt said it looks forward to Ethiopia and Sudan taking the lead of approving the agreement and signing it "as soon as possible", describing the deal as one that is "fair, balanced, and achieves the three countries' interests."

Egypt and Sudan expressed concern due to unfinished work on the safe operation of the GERD, and the need to implement all necessary safety measures in accordance with international standards before filling begins.

US President Donald Trump told his Egyptian counterpart Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi in a phone call that Washington will keep up efforts for a deal between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan over GERD, the Egyptian presidency said. Al-Sisi told Trump that Cairo will continue "giving this issue the utmost attention in defense of the interests of the Egyptian people, their capabilities and their future."<sup>17</sup>

**The Egyptian parliament** - Suleiman Wahdan, deputy speaker of the Egyptian parliament, said in a statement that Ethiopia's avoidance of signing the agreement constituted a deliberate attempt to harm downstream countries. He added that Egypt would not stand helpless in the face of "Addis Ababa's conspiracies" and Cairo was ready to take all necessary measures to preserve Egypt's historic rights to Nile water.<sup>18</sup>

Egypt claimed that "The fair and balanced agreement drafted by the US and World Bank included articles that Ethiopia had agreed. The agreement reached in the recent round of meetings in Washington is fully consistent with international law, represents a fair and balanced compromise and is the product of intensive negotiations between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia over the last four months in Washington."<sup>19</sup>

**Egypt's Supreme Committee for Nile Water (SCNW)** - Egypt's SCNW met on March 8, 2020, to discuss the latest development on the GERD. The SCNW meeting, which was attended by Minister of Irrigation Mohamed Abdel-Aati and representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and the General Intelligence Service (GIS), discussed the Egyptian strategy to ensure Egypt's riparian interests and its rights to the Nile water.<sup>20</sup>

Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry embarked in March 2020 on a regional tour involving seven Arab countries where he discussed the developments in the GERD talks.<sup>21</sup>

**The Arab League** on March 4, 2020, urged Ethiopia to adhere to international law and not take any unilateral measures that could infringe on Egypt's rights and water interests.<sup>22</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia rejected the "Resolution" in its entirety. This "Resolution" gives blind support to a member state without taking into consideration key facts at the center of the GERD talks.<sup>23</sup>

### **Sudan**

Sudan reaffirmed its commitment to the negotiation process to reach a comprehensive agreement to fill and operate GERD, reserving the common interests of the three countries. It stressed the necessity of reaching a comprehensive agreement that includes a safe functioning by the dam before the beginning of the first filling. Khartoum called on both Cairo and Addis Ababa to return to the talks for the best interest of the three countries.<sup>24</sup>

The Sudanese foreign ministry said in its statement, issued on March 8, 2020, that it had its reservations concerning the draft resolution of the Arab League, proposed by Egypt because it was issued without any consultation with the Sudanese government. The Sudanese statement added that the draft resolution did not serve "the spirit of dialogue and negotiations between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia under the sponsorship of the US administration and the World Bank concerning the GERD."<sup>25</sup>

Egypt's foreign ministry spokesperson Ahmed Hafez expressed his disappointment on March 8, 2020, with a statement issued by the Sudanese foreign minister concerning Sudan's reservations over the Arab League resolution supporting Egypt in the dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).<sup>26</sup>

Both statements by the Sudanese and Egyptian foreign ministries came within 24 hours following a phone call between the chairman of the Sovereign Council of Sudan Abdel-Fattah Al-Burhan and Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi.

### **Summary**

The Nile basin is one of the hotspots for water-related conflicts. The Nile basin is the only major river basin lacking an inclusive, permanent legal and institutional framework for its utilization and management. The lack of Nile basin wide agreement reflects changes in the balance of geopolitical powers in the region.

After Washington has failed to seal signatures from the three countries, US Secretary of the Treasury, Steven Mnuchin said that the agreement should meet the principles of not causing significant harm to downstream countries and the final testing and filling should not take place without an agreement. He added that the United States would remain engaged in talks with Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan until a final agreement on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is signed.<sup>27</sup>

After Ethiopia pulled out of the talks, Egypt has adopted a firmer tone in recent weeks. President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi is still stressing Egypt's commitment to cooperate with the US but he is now adding very clear lines about the fact Egypt cannot take any risks over its Nile water share. Egypt may have several options:

- To press for negotiations to continue, which possibly means changing some articles Egypt has already initialed.
- To work out a new agreement from scratch.

- To abandon negotiations altogether and refer the case to the African Union and to the UN Security Council. Egypt is already raising the issue in every available international forum.

The Ethiopian News Agency said that the filling of the dam will begin in July 2020, the Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said on March 8, 2020, that Ethiopia cannot, under any circumstances, start filling the GERD until an agreement is reached with the downstream countries. But it's unclear whether further talks would be scheduled between the three countries.

In order to prevent a crisis that can destabilize the whole region, the US and the international community should redouble efforts to move toward a final and comprehensive agreement on the GERD.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Egypt's Nile water committee in permanent session over GERD: Cabinet, Ahram online, March 8, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Amir Dakkak, Egypt's Water Crisis – Recipe for Disaster, EcoMENA, July 22, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Doaa El-Bey, Bringing in the bank, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue 1375, 4-10 January 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Mission to Africa, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue 1357, (17 - 23 August 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Gavin du Venage, Ethiopian dam creates waves, The National, April 24, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Sources: US-proposed GERD deal sets Ethiopia water release at 37 bcm, major disputes remain, Mada Masr, February 17, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Doaa El-Bey , Filling GERD: A race against time, Ahram online, March 4, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia received US-prepared deal on GERD: Sudan's irrigation minister, Ahram Online , February 24, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Menna Alaa El-Din , US says to remain engaged with Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on GERD after no deal from brokered talks, Ahram online, February 29, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ethiopia leader rejects call for World Bank arbitration in dam dispute with Egypt, Ahram Online, January 21, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Doaa El-Bey , Filling GERD: A race against time, Ahram online, March 4, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Egypt slams Ethiopian statement on Arab League support over GERD, Egypt independent, March 8, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Doaa El-Bey , Filling GERD: A race against time, Ahram online, March 4, 2020.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Egypt's Nile water committee in permanent session over GERD: Cabinet, Ahram online, March 8, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Zeinab El-Gundy , Egypt expresses disappointment over Sudan's reservations regarding Arab resolution on GERD, Ahram online March 9, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Egypt slams Ethiopian statement on Arab League support over GERD, Egypt independent, March 8, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Statement on the Arab League`s “Resolution” Concerning the GERD, March 6, 2020.  
<https://ethiopianembassy.be/2020/03/06/statement-on-the-arab-leagues-resolution-concerning-the-gerd/>

<sup>24</sup> Zeinab El-Gundy , Egypt expresses disappointment over Sudan's reservations regarding Arab resolution on GERD, Ahram online March 9, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Menna Alaa El-Din , US says to remain engaged with Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on GERD after no deal from brokered talks, Ahram online, February 29, 2020.