Sudan warns against escalation in Nile dam dispute

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Sudan has warned against escalation and urged further negotiations with Egypt and Ethiopia over the construction of a controversial dam on the Blue Nile river by Addis Ababa.

Important points

- Tensions are running high between the three countries after recent talks failed to produce a deal on the filling and operation of the $4.6bn Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.
- Ethiopia has declared plans to start filling the dam next month, regardless of whether a deal has been reached.
- The dam is more than 70 percent complete and promises to generate much-needed electricity for the country.
- Egypt, which views the massive hydroelectric barrage as an existential threat, urged the United Nations Security Council to intervene in the dispute, citing Ethiopia’s "non-positive stances".
- Cairo fears the dam could severely reduce its water supply from the Nile, which provides nearly 97 percent of Egypt’s freshwater needs.
- Addis Ababa says the dam is indispensable for its development and insists Egypt’s water share will not be affected.
- The Nile is a lifeline supplying water and electricity to the 10 countries it traverses.
- Egypt says the dam threatens the Nile’s flow, most of which originates in the Blue Nile, with damaging implications for its food supply and economy.

Egypt and Ethiopia have once again locked horns over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile.

On Feb. 26, Ethiopia temporarily suspended its participation in the U.S.-mediated negotiations over the filling and operation of the GERD, requesting more time to deliberate on the draft agreement.

With the dam 70 percent complete and its reservoir expected to start being filled in July, the time for reaching an agreement is ticking away.

While the parties have sought international mediation from the U.S. and South Africa, that is no substitute for regional cooperation among the parties.

About Nile River:

- The longest river in the world, the Nile stretches across 11 countries in its journey of 4,000 miles from the equatorial rivers that feed Lake Victoria to its final destination in the Mediterranean Sea.
- Among the countries that share the Nile, two have the most at stake. Egypt, a desert nation of 100 million people, is literally the creation of the Nile, relying on the river for 90 percent of its freshwater needs.
Ethiopia, an East African country of 112 million, contributes the lion’s share of the Nile waters, with its three tributaries—the Blue Nile, Sobat, and Atbara—carrying about 84 percent of the total runoff in the Nile.

With a growing but otherwise resource-poor economy, Ethiopia is keen to develop its vast potential for hydroelectricity generation. Disagreements over the Nile River have been the source of conflict between upper and downstream countries because life in both sides of the Nile highly depends on the waters of the Nile River.

Historically, there have been many treaties over the Nile River that were negotiated between different stakeholders in different places in 1902, 1906, 1925, 1929 and in 1959. During the colonial era, Great Britain, France and Italy (specially Great Britain) either negotiated in the behalf of their colonies, or they controlled the Nile through their military presence in Africa.

About Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD):

1. The GERD, a $5 billion project that will be the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa, is a part of that ambition.
2. The dam is located on Ethiopia’s flank of the Blue Nile, just 12 miles from its border with Sudan. It will have paramount economic value to Ethiopia, doubling the country’s electricity generation capacity and earning as much as a billion dollars annually from energy exports to Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti, Kenya, and potentially Egypt.
3. The GERD’s massive reservoir will store 74 billion cubic meters (BCM) of water, roughly equal to a year-and-half’s worth of the Blue Nile’s flow, which will be gradually filled upon the dam’s completion.
4. As the July deadline draws closer for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the river Nile to become functional, the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt, with Sudan caught in between, has escalated into a diplomatic stand-off.
5. Differences were laid bare recently when Ethiopia skipped the latest round of tripartite negotiations with Egypt and Sudan in Washington, being mediated by the U.S. and the World Bank.

Uganda President calls for urgent African summit on GERD:

Uganda President said that African presidents must hold frank discussions regarding the Nile River dilemma during this summit, and stressed the importance of ensuring equitable and sustainable usage of the river’s waters.

Kenyan president emphasized the importance of properly utilizing natural resources and sustainably addressing the needs of increasing populations.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian community in New York and New Jersey is gearing up to organize demonstrations in front of the White House, pressuring the US administration to protect Egypt’s water rights and support the negotiations.

The challenges for the fair utilisation of waters among the riparian states have only been compounded by the pressures of population growth and the effects of global warming.

Challenges Ahead that need to address:
Impact regional & International Trade: An escalated tension between Ethiopia & Egypt would threaten the vital international trade route through the Suez Canal and along the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia has stated that the dispute over the dam project is only a trilateral issue involving Egypt and Sudan.

Ethiopia asserts its rights for an equitable share of the Blue Nile flows from the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) signed by some of the 10 Nile Basin Initiative nations.

The establishment of the Nile River Basin Commission mandated by the CFA has not materialised so far.

Ethiopia is concerned that a long delay in filling the reservoir would jeopardise returns on its investments and hamper the prospects for overall growth.

The mediation role played by US highlights the significance of the issue and the potential conflict it holds if unresolved. However, the mediation has not been able to progress substantially due to lack of true intentions from both sides.

Conclusion:

Ethiopia and Egypt should be ready to make significant concessions to avoid a catastrophic escalation in this seemingly intractable dispute.

An agreement involving Egypt, Ethiopia and others river basin countries for equitable sharing of water.

Sustainable use of river water given the ever-increasing problem of pollution and climate change.

Consistent with the principles set out in the declaration of principles, in particular the principles of not causing significant harm to downstream countries, final testing and filling should not take place without an agreement.

These countries can take inspiration from Indus Water Treaty signed between India and Pakistan brokered by World Bank in 1960. The treaty has been functioning smoothly and has endured three wars over nearly six decades.

Read more about NILE RIVER: https://www.treehugger.com/nile-river-facts-4868689