

'SINCE THE PHARAOHS WE KNOW HOW THINGS ARE'

Water politics along the Nile

The only equitable way to manage the Nile Basin and its water resources is for all countries along its banks to make fair share agreements. But it isn't likely to happen

BY NIZAR MANEK

Ethiopia's emperor Haile Selassie once invited Dr Ibrahim Kamel to Addis Ababa and housed him in the Ghion Hotel, which shared a garden wall with the imperial palace. They chatted as the emperor took his morning stroll in the garden with his cheetahs, says Kamel, now 76, an engineer and businessman who between 1990 and 1995 was also a member of the Egyptian parliament and its Parliamentary Economic Committee. Such a garden conversation now would focus on the \$4.8bn Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile. Ethiopia sees its construction as an expression of national sovereignty. But Kamel says Egypt "cannot afford to have the Nile run by countries that one day love us, then the next have a bout of sovereignty fever."

Ahmed Abu Zeid, African Affairs advisor to Egypt's foreign ministry agrees that the situation is dangerous, because no technical

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studies on the GERD have been agreed between the three countries, yet construction of the dam continues, 20km upstream of the Ethiopia-Sudan border. He doesn't rule out any strategy, "political, legal or technical", in regard to Egypt's interests on the Blue Nile. According to Kamel, Egypt is only doing what Haile Selassie did in 1925 when he complained to the League of Nations about agreements between Britain and Italy over Lake Tana, in the Ethiopian Highlands. "We're back in 1891," Kamel says, referring to the Anglo-Italian Protocol between Britain (representing Egypt and Sudan) and Italy (representing Eritrea). Field Marshal Abdel Fattah Sissi is expected to make a statement on the dam during his Egyptian presidential campaign.

Kamel, who has been involved in Nile Basin issues since 1962, says that former president Hosni Mubarak had wanted to do something (until an assassination attempt in Addis Ababa in 1995), "but then decided to give Africa the cold shoulder ... Since the time of the

Pharaohs, we know how things are." He also says: "If we have to go to war, we'll go to war – period. Dams are easy to bomb or destroy by missile. Who wants that?" He recounts conversations on Nile issues with heads of state including Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Congo-Kinshasa's Joseph Kabila.

Before Mubarak, Anwar al-Sadat threatened that Egypt might well go to war with any state that reduced its share of the Nile waters. However, right up to his assassination in 1981, he was too busy dealing with Middle East events: the Suez crisis in 1956, the October war in 1973 and the Camp David accords in 1978.

Trilateral meetings on the GERD between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan have over the past year come to an acrimonious standstill. Egypt has decided to boycott the process: this April, a secret international experts' report (on which the meetings were based) was leaked and posted online (1), partially confirming the reasons for Cairo's opposition.

Kamel says there has to be interdependence among the African states (Rwanda; Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda; the Sudans; Ethiopia; Egypt). But many more powers have a stake in Nile Basin cooperation: the UN Development Programme, the US State Department, the European Commission and European countries (Britain, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland). Through the Nile Basin Initiative, since 1999, western donors have worked to develop transboundary cooperation between the 10 states that share Nile waters, and lay the foundations for a permanent river basin commission.

The GERD dispute has international dimensions. Italy's ambassador to Egypt, Maurizio Massari, South Africa's state security minister, Siyabonga Cwele, and Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, have all declared an interest in mediating between Egypt and Ethiopia. Their offers didn't come out of the blue. The Milan-based Salini Costruttori won a no-bid construction contract for the dam

in 2010. The South African electricity public utility Eskom has interests in Congo-Kinshasa's 4,300-megawatt Inga III dam, which would provide hydropower to the Southern African Power Pool (the first formal international power pool in Africa). Turkey is developing economic relations with Africa and wants to share its experience of constructing the Atatürk Dam in Anatolia in the catchments of the Euphrates River (shared with Syria and Iraq) (2).

Egypt has instead sought Gulf mediation under the leadership of Saudi Arabia – a sign of desperation. Egypt's irrigation minister Mohammed Abdel-Muttalib was exceptionally rude about Turkey (its relations with Egypt's military-backed regime were soured by prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan backing the government of Mohammed Morsi). "When Turkey built the Atatürk Dam, it made the Syrians and the Iraqis thirsty and ignored international agreements," Abdel-Muttalib said in February. "Egypt is not Iraq or Syria, and Ethiopia is not Turkey" (3).

To end the dispute, Kamel proposes arbitration, or war; or an alternative, provided by the late British hydrologist Harold Edwin Hurst, that the whole Nile river basin should be managed as one, with long- and medium-term storage in the African and Ethiopian plateau lakes under the collective sovereignty of all basin countries (using valley reservoirs for annual and excess water storage because there is no way to allocate sovereignty to a single country).

After Egypt's 2011 revolution, Kamel submitted another proposal to the government, and has been "on their backs ever since": all Nile Basin member countries should form a consortium company (and put \$20bn at its disposal) with pro-rata percentages of their shares of water, and jointly manage the basin

"to make money for everybody". Kamel suggests that in years when there is "over-abundant water that ends up in Egypt's Aswan High Dam, that water can be sold for cash to any member country that wants it." It could be piped across the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia, or piped to Libya, earning foreign currency for basin countries. "If the water came from Ethiopia, that would mean Ethiopia would get a bigger share of foreign currency, and give people an incentive to spend money and improve the system."

The dam presents Egypt with a wider legal predicament. The 2010 Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), which Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and Burundi have already signed, but which Egypt and Sudan have rejected, is a new framework on water resources that will come into effect later this year. The CFA would deprive Egypt of its

veto power over any water development project on the Nile. Ana Elisa Cascão, a specialist in basin hydro-politics, says the agreement will challenge the colonial-era arrangements based on "inequitable utilisation" of transboundary resources (as in the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement between Egypt and Sudan). The CFA is inspired by the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which has not yet been ratified by enough countries to be binding, but is already the guiding framework for transboundary basin agreements. Ethiopia could be the one of the next countries to ratify it.

Egypt is more concerned about the CFA, which represents what Cascão calls an "epoch shift" in basin geopolitics, than about the GERD. She says it would mean that all the Nile countries would have to operate according to "equitable utilisation", so that not only Egypt

and Sudan would have the right to a water allocation. This is altering the dynamics of Egypt-Ethiopia relations, and Egypt's relations with the upstream bloc. Egypt last month signed a military cooperation deal with Salva Kiir's South Sudan (4), but Egyptian leverage there can do little to suspend the epoch shift (5).

Egypt's diplomats are aware of the importance of South Sudan's decision to join the CFA, and want it to halt its ratification. South Sudan says the process is irreversible. The country has been in turmoil since December and understands the benefits of a rapprochement with Egypt. As Ethiopian diplomat Birkuk Mekonnen observes (6), both Sudans rely on the Nile for water, yet when South Sudan became independent in 2011, there was no agreement on its post-independence rights to Nile water. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former Egyptian minister of state, predicted 30 years ago: "The next war in our region will be over the waters of the Nile, not politics."

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(1) International Panel of Experts (IPE) on Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Project (GERDP), Final Report, Addis Ababa, 31 May 2013; previously *International Rivers* confidential report published on 31 March 2014.

(2) According to Turkey's Ministry of Economy website, in 2011 Turkey's exports to Africa were worth \$13.3bn, 52.7% up on 2003; the value of projects by Turkish contractors in African countries exceeded \$47bn.

(3) "Turkey, Egypt in fresh diplomatic row over Ethiopia dam", *Today's Zaman*, 13 February 2014.

(4) "South Sudan signs military cooperation deal with Egypt", *Sudan Tribune*, 23 March 2014.

(5) "S. Sudan's Kiir reassures Ethiopia PM on dam, Egypt military accord", *TurkishPress.com*, 18 April 2014.

(6) "South Sudan conflict and Egypt's hydro politics", *Sudan Tribune*, 9 April 2014.