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**ETHIOPIAN WATERS ADVISORY COUNCIL (EWAC)**

**Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD): Letter to Reverend Jesse Jackson by Dr. Mohamud Abu-Zeid - A Rejoinder**

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(See Dr. Abu-Zeid's letter at: <https://www.zehabesha.com/egypts-reply-to-reverend-jesse-jackson/>)

Dear Dr. Abu-Zeid,

As you may recall, I represented IUCN-The World Conservation Union<sup>1</sup> at the founding meeting of the World Water Council (WWC) in 1996, Marseilles, France and the First World Water Forum in Marrakech, Morocco a year later.

Permit me to extend my congratulations to you for ably chairing the WWC and your appointment as Honorary President for Life of the Council. You also ably chaired key sessions of the First World Water Forum, which was convened under the theme "Vision for Water, Life and the Environment" and brought together some 500 participants (scientists, educators, policy makers, practitioners, leaders of international organizations and civil society) from wide ranging disciplines to promote understanding about water, the imperatives of water conservation, equitable and sustainable use and chart a way forward. I presented a paper titled: Water and Biodiversity, published in Water, World's Common Heritage, Proceedings of the First World Forum. Indeed, the scientific thoughts and evidence driven approaches that the WWC laid out at the time have lived with me and inspired me to write this rejoinder and also be a founder of the Ethiopian Water Advisory Council (EWAC).

Let me, first, seize this opportunity to congratulate and thank Reverend Jesse Jackson for drawing global attention to water issues, bringing out the truth, and furthering the ideals of the World Water Council.

Dr. Abu-Zeid,

It is incumbent on all of us associated with WWC to be the voice of science, reason, sustainability, equity, justice, and cooperation. The pursuit of technical solutions to political problems encountered around the Nile opens ample opportunities and policy options not only to address current issues but new and emerging issues in the years to come. Nevertheless, what you wrote as a reply to the Rev. Jesse Jackson, negates the values, principles and goals promoted by WWC.

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<sup>1</sup> I was Assistant Director General for Programmes and Policy at the time and left the organization over two decades ago. Opinions in this letter, thus, have nothing to do with IUCN or CEESP. Nor do they have anything to do with the Ethiopian Government, which I left almost thirty years ago.

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Let me explain why I made that conclusion:

1. **Distorted historical facts:** You wrote “Ethiopia’s position is...to consecrate unrestrained and unregulated right to exploit the Nile resources without taking into consideration the rights of downstream countries.” On the contrary, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt have long and deep history of interconnectedness and interdependence marked by shared identities, traditions, and mythologies shaped and nurtured by the Nile. At no time in its history has Ethiopia claimed exclusive control over its transboundary resources. Generosity, magnanimity, and the pursuit of collective peace and prosperity have been the defining characteristics of Ethiopians. No wonder, the Greek philosopher, Homer described Ethiopians as the “blameless people.”

In 613 A.D., Ethiopia, though Christian country at the time, provided shelter to Prophet Muhammad and followers, when they fled from persecution by rulers in Mecca. Egypt’s Coptic Christians also fled to Ethiopia in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century AD upon persecution by Egyptian rulers. Ethiopia not only welcomed them but embraced them as a member of the same family. The treaties and cooperation frameworks signed by Emperor Menelik and subsequent leaders that you mentioned, all show Ethiopia’s commitment to pursuing her use of water for development while respecting interests of downstream countries and ensuring no significant harm.

History teaches us that it was, in fact, Egypt, perhaps motivated and emboldened by the violent colonialism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that started the politicization of the Nile and confrontational hydro-politics through a policy of aggressive southward expansion under Muhammad Ali Pasha (r. 1805-1848) rule. The aggression continued with Egypt’s declaration of war on Ethiopia, ostensibly, to colonize the country and control the Nile in 1875 and 1876 that ended with Egypt’s humiliating defeats.

Since then, Egypt changed its war strategy from national level confrontation to political destabilization within Ethiopia through fomenting and, at times, manufacturing divisions inside Ethiopia. Egypt’s decision to bring the GERD issue to the UN Security Council and Washington and start beating the drums of war to put undue pressure on Ethiopia are clear testimonies of choosing confrontation over science and cooperation.

2. **False Claims and Missing Information:** In your letter, you falsely claimed that “Egypt has not sought to bind Ethiopia to which it is not a party” and “Egypt has never exercised hegemonic power over the Nile.” But glaringly missing in your letter is the 1959 Nile Treaty that Egypt and Sudan signed without Ethiopia’s participation. This Treaty granted all the Nile waters - mean annual flow of 84 cu m at Dongola/Aswan for the period 1890-1995 (FAO, [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)) to Egypt (55.5 bcm) and Sudan (18.5 bcm). More surprising,

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the Agreement granted Egypt a veto power over development projects upstream, which it exercised. What more hegemony would there be?

Indeed, Egypt used its influence to block development financing from the World Bank, African Development Bank, European Union, and bilateral sources. Suffice it here to mention a Reuter's report, "Egypt is widely credited with having blocked a loan from the



African Development Bank for a dam project in Ethiopia in 1990." (Reuters.com). Located in Choke Mountains, one of the two Blue Nile water towers, this project was studied over 30 years ago at the time, when I was Minister of Planning and Development of Ethiopia. It was designed to improve the lives of these people shown and had extremely high rates of economic return and socio-environmental benefits. When I went there ten years ago, two decades after Egypt's blockage of the project, I found people languishing under conditions of abject poverty (wearing the same blanket day and night) and a highly degraded environment. Egypt should take responsibility for keeping these people where they are today.



Photo: Mersie Eijgu

Egypt's actions did harm, not only to people, but also to the very sources of the Blue Nile, which accounts for 85 percent of the overall flow of the river. Today, the two water towers of the Nile, the Guna and Choke mountains are severely degraded, water table sinking, feeder rivers drying and volume of the Blue Nile waters visibly diminishing.

3. **Evading the truth:** We all know that Nile is the only major river in the world without a treaty among riparian states. What you mentioned as the 1902 Treaty signed by Emperor Menelik "not to construct or allow to be constructed ...that would arrest the flow of waters into the Nile" was a tactical move by Menelik to keep the British colonizers at bay following his win over another colonizer, the Italians in 1896. Further, it expresses the wish of all Ethiopians, past and present, not to inflict significant harm to Egypt. The 1993 Framework Agreement that you mentioned "refrain from engaging in any activity that would cause appreciable harm" is consistent with Ethiopia's historical position.

Indeed, the first comprehensive engagement of the Nile riparian countries started with the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) in 1999, with Egypt as one of the founding members, which unfortunately you failed to mention. Established with the motto of "One River, One People and One Vision," the objective of NBI is 'achieving sustainable socio-economic development through the equitable utilization of, and benefit from, the common Nile

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Basin water resources' ([www.nilebasin.org](http://www.nilebasin.org)). Over the last 20 years, NBI has also managed to maintain a platform for cooperation, generate knowledge, and contribute to human and institutional capacity building across riparian countries. It developed a Cooperation Framework Agreement (CFA) that helped move away from the bilateral colonial agreements to all-inclusive Nile Treaty. The Treaty envisaged establishing a permanent institutional mechanism, the Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC) to promote the implementation of the CFA and to facilitate cooperation among the Nile Basin States. After almost two decades of negotiation, Egypt and Sudan refused to sign the CFA and further negotiations for a Nile treaty suspended.

4. **Misrepresenting GERD.** You generated a litany of misleading and untrue statements about GERD's impacts stating "Ethiopia's .....unilaterally commence the construction of GERD, failure to conduct ... studies on environmental impacts and social effects .... start filling the dam without agreement with... riparian states" "GERD and negotiations not adequately and accurately presented." We all know that GERD is a hydropower generating project, which basically means whatever water used, flows back to the river. Several studies have also confirmed that water reduction during GERD filling has little or no negative impact to Sudan's water users and on irrigation water uses in Egypt. Even if there is minimal loss during filling, (mostly due to evaporation), there are many possibilities for mitigating downstream risks.

The truth is the only factor that can set all of us free. Ethiopia is doing everything possible to generate full understanding of the dam and its benefits. Whatever done so far is consistent with the 2015 Declaration of Principles (DOP), you mentioned, on "rules governing the filling and operations of the GERD in a manner that is equitable and reasonable and that avoids the infliction of significant harm on downstream countries."

5. **Stretching the Untruth.** You wrote "Ethiopia has adopted a consistent policy of obstructionism that hindered agreement on GERD." On the contrary, it is Egypt that has played an obstructionist and hegemonic role for years. Was Egypt courteous enough to consult with Ethiopia, or show an iota of concern for equitable share with Ethiopia, when it built the Aswan Dam and put in place structures that over commit the Nile waters? Ethiopia, on the other hand, supported the Joint Multipurpose Project (JMP) of the Eastern Nile countries (Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan). Funded by the World Bank, the study (Blackmore and Wittington, 2008) proposed four cascaded large storage dams in Upper Blue Nile (Abbay) that offer substantial economic benefits and enhance water availability in the system. Ethiopia had hoped the JMP will be a first opportunity towards cooperation and development, only, to be crushed by Egypt (Cascao and Allen, 2016). GERD came as an alternative.

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You also falsely accused Ethiopia of commencing “construction without conducting any studies on environmental impact and socioeconomic effects on downstream countries.” We know environmental and social impact studies are absolute requirements these days. Indeed, extensive environmental and social impact assessment studies of the GERD have been conducted and were subject of reviews by Egyptian experts.

6. **Undermining the spirit and substance of Pan-African institutions and solidarity.** You wrote a wrong and misleading statement that “Ethiopia’s conduct inconsistent with the spirit of Pan African solidarity and riparian neighborliness.” Throughout its history, Ethiopia has stood big and generous in its support of African liberation struggles. As a founder and host of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) now the African Union, has promoted Pan-African values and solidarity.

It is Egypt that brought the GERD issue to Washington, DC and UN Security Council disrespectful of Pan African (African Union) and regional institutions (NBI) created to resolve any misunderstandings and conflicts arising in the continent. After all, GERD is not only an Ethiopian resource but also that of Africa, including Egypt and Sudan, as it is a critical component of the African Power Pool, without which Africa will fail to realize its cherished goal of 100 percent African electrification set by Agenda 2063. GERD is an African project and should be arbitered by African institutions.

7. **Incomplete information:** You wrote “Ethiopia is endowed with abundant water resources in and outside the Nile.” On the contrary, more than 62 million Ethiopians live under water crisis.... 7.5 percent of the global water crisis is in Ethiopia ([www.lifewater.org](http://www.lifewater.org)) despite its huge potential. 83.5 percent of the Ethiopian population



Photo: Eilau, 200

endures multidimensional poverty compared to Egypt’s 5.2 percent (UNDP HDR 2019); yearly water consumption of Egypt is more than seven times that of Ethiopia (FAO); and only 44.3 percent of Ethiopians have access to electricity compared to Egypt’s 100 percent (World Bank). Most Ethiopians, including those in upper Blue Nile Basin rely on traditional biomass, inhale indoor smoke and suffer from respiratory diseases (see photo, Kimir Dengay, Guna Mountains, a Blue Nile water tower). Further, Ethiopia is highly vulnerable to recurrent drought with the 1973/74 and 1984/85 droughts with impacts of apocalyptic proportions while the 2003 severe drought left Lake Tana water dropping to a level that curtailed any kind of navigation. On the other hand,

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Egypt's aquifers hold enough fresh water to last it 300-400 years at the rate of its current water consumption. While Ethiopia languishes in land-lockedness, Egypt has access to technologies that would help her harness its marine water to the benefit of her people.

8. **Forgetting the unforgettable - climate change.** You wrote about Egypt's vulnerability to water shortages but failed to mention the adverse impacts of climate change and the highly vulnerability of the Nile Basin to climate variability and change. The year to year reduction in both the volume and quality of water flows from feeder rivers, Lake Tana (the reservoir) and the Blue Nile itself is visible to the naked eye. Temperature rises, recurrent drought, shifts in human settlements as people search for fertile land, limited access to modern farm technologies and heavy reliance on biomass energy – which mean that water-saving trees are cut – have compounded the problem. The Blue Nile is drying up and may not exist by 2080 (see reporting by Schlanger, <https://qz.com/1709757/climate-change-threatens-the-niles-critical-water-supply/> referring to work done by Dartmouth University researchers. Climate change is the biggest challenge Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia face, not GERD as you put it.

### **The Way Forward**

Let us give science, reason, peace, and cooperation a chance. What Ethiopia demands is the efficient, equitable, sustainable use and management of the Nile waters for mutual benefit and the well-being of all people dependent on it- in line with what has been advocated by the WWC, United Nations, African Agenda 2063 and Nile Basin Initiative. Let us silence the drums of war, halt the spread of false information and move towards win-win solutions.

Ethiopia should proceed with the filling of GERD as per schedule and indeed, the best time is now. Let us also make every effort to ensure optimal power generation capacity to enable recoup, in a reasonable period, the investment in GERD mobilized from all Ethiopians (most of them living under conditions of abject poverty). At the same time, let us make every effort to fight the biggest enemy-climate change- and significantly improve the volume and quality of the Nile waters, which is doable, through upstream water ecosystem restoration and lift the people from abject poverty, darkness, respiratory diseases and offer them with alternative livelihood sources. This is a task that needs to start today side by side with the filling of GERD.

Mersie Ejigu

Founding Member Former Representative, World Water Council

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