

Washington update - May 15, 2020

The Blue Nile is Essential for Ethiopia's Future

Egypt and Ethiopia are locked in a dispute over Ethiopia's rights to exploit the Blue Nile River. While this may seem like an obscure conflict for most Americans, it is vitally important for the prosperity of tens of millions of people, and for the security of a region that is of vital importance to the U.S. and the world.

Egypt is asking the UN Security Council to intervene to prevent Ethiopia from following through with its intention to start filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in July of this year. The complaint is part of a long-running dispute between Ethiopia, which desperately needs the power and water resources the dam will provide, and Egypt which is creating an unnecessary conflict to distract its population from economic collapse and government repression.

The Ethiopian government has, correctly, rejected demands that it relinquish its right to start filling the Renaissance Dam. It will do this in ways that do not harm downstream countries.

Ethiopia believes issues about ensuring equitable access to the Blue Nile's waters can and should be resolved through tripartite talks with Egypt and Sudan.

An understanding of some basic facts is necessary to understand the situation.

Although 85% of the water in the Nile originates in Ethiopia, in the Blue Nile, the Ethiopian people derive very little benefit from the river.

The GERD will meet Ethiopia's need for power. Today, 83% of Ethiopians lack access to electricity; 94% rely on wood for daily cooking and heating. This is an unacceptable situation, especially since Ethiopia possesses abundant water resources and hydropower potential, second only to the Democratic Republic of Congo in all of Africa. Only 3% of this potential has been developed.

The GERD is also essential to improving Ethiopia's food security. Currently, less than 5% of irrigable land in the Blue Nile basin has been developed for food production.

Ethiopia is at a critical crossroads with a large and increasing population, a depressed national economy, insufficient agricultural production, and a low number of developed energy sources. The upper Blue Nile basin harbors considerable untapped potential for irrigation and hydropower development and expansion.

The famines that periodically bring mass deaths and deprivation to Ethiopia are a direct result of underdevelopment of irrigation and water resources. Today, up to six million people are in danger of suffering from food shortages in Ethiopia. Completion of the GERD would be a major step toward alleviating their suffering.

While the U.S. and other countries have in the past provided food relief to Ethiopia, there is a need for long-term solutions, such as large-scale water projects on the Blue Nile. Emergency food aid for Ethiopia is needed and appreciated, but the current famine reinforces the need for structural changes in Ethiopia.

The Renaissance Dam is essential but not sufficient. It is not a coincidence that Ethiopia is one of the few countries which bars private ownership of agricultural land and it is one of the few places where famines recur with terrible consistency. It is time to end the cycle.

The U.S. government, and other donors including the World Bank have been urging the regime Ethiopia for years to change its policies. The solutions have been obvious for decades: give tillers ownership of their land; mobilize the international community to create large-scale irrigation and other agricultural development programs (including exploiting the Blue Nile); and end Ethiopian government corruption that puts the needs of a small number of officials over those of millions of people.

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