

Washington Update, June 24, 2020

Water hasn't yet started to accumulate in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) but tensions are rising in Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan. Negotiations over the dam, especially over terms for its filling and operation, seem to have reached an impasse just as Ethiopia is preparing to launch the next phase by allowing the waters of the Blue Nile to collect in the dam.

Although there have been repeated calls for negotiation and compromise from organizations outside the region, there is little understanding of the historical and practical realities. While Egypt asserts rights to waters of the Nile, it has never consulted with Ethiopia or any other country regarding its own water management activities, including creation of the massive Aswan Dam. Ethiopia has the right -- and to serve its people has no alternative -- to operate the GERD. Ethiopia has already provided assurances to Egypt and Sudan that the GERD will not negatively affect their people.

Last Friday, in an interview with The Associated Press, Ethiopian Foreign Minister Gedu Andargachew declared that Ethiopia would start filling the \$4.6 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam next month, even without an agreement. "For us it is not mandatory to reach an agreement before starting filling the dam, hence we will commence the filling process in the coming rainy season," he said. "We are working hard to reach a deal, but still we will go ahead with our schedule whatever the outcome is. If we have to wait for others' blessing, then the dam may remain idle for years, which we won't allow to happen," he said. He added that "we want to make it clear that Ethiopia will not beg Egypt and Sudan to use its own water resource for its development," pointing out that Ethiopia is paying for the dam's construction itself.

Ethiopia views Egypt's demands as effectively as enshrining colonial-era agreements with Sudan and the United Kingdom that have historically granted Cairo an abnormally high share of water from the Nile. Ethiopia was not a party to the deals signed in 1929 and 1959, and thus does not recognize them.

The United Nations and members of the U.S. Congress are calling for a peaceful resolution of the dispute. "We urge Egypt, we urge Ethiopia and

Sudan to work together to intensify efforts to peacefully resolve outstanding differences,” UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said during a press conference on June 23.

The Congressional Black Caucus released a statement indicating that it “encourages the continued cooperation and peaceful negotiations of all stakeholders in the construction of the GERD. These negotiations should be based on mutual benefit, good faith, and the principles of international law.”

Mesfin Mekonen