

Ethiopia's Public Delegation: A Step-forward in Nile diplomacy

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The Ethiopian public diplomacy delegation is now touring Egypt. The delegation, comprised of renowned personalities from all walks of life, left for Cairo this week.

As Ethiopian Foreign Minister Tedros Adhanom pointed out:

"The delegation is the first of its kind and [aims] to further strengthen the good relations fostered since last June following a meeting of the two countries' leaders"

"It will be a good opportunity to express Ethiopia's belief in common development and narrow the gap [with Egypt] created due to the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam".

The public diplomacy delegation, which is led by Speaker of the House of Peoples' Representative, AbaDullaGemeda, is in Egypt with the objective of building trust and fraternal relations between the peoples' of Ethiopia and Egypt. It comprises prominent academicians, former Ambassadors, religious leaders, artists and other prominent personalities drawn from various sectors.

It is expected to that the visit of the Ethiopian Public Diplomacy Delegation will have a vital role in strengthening people to people relations between the peoples of the two nations and conveying Ethiopians desire for mutual growth, strong bond and genuine cooperation to several Egyptian officials and religious leaders – including Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, Al-Azhar Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb and Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II.

As the Foreign Minister observed, the visit of the delegation is timely as it would have a positive impact in building on the positive momentum between the leadership of the two countries exemplified in the resumption of the tripartite talk over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the successful Joint Ministerial commission held in Addis Ababa recently.

Indeed, the delegation is not a minor event rather a landmark. It is a culmination and a showcase of Ethiopia's commitment towards genuine regional cooperation in general and the efforts of the past three and half years.

Ethiopia had turned a leaf in her foreign policy in the past two decades. The Foreign Policy and National Security Strategy has redefined and re-evaluated her priorities . identified the major threats to Ethiopia and indeed to its survival: economic backwardness and the desperate poverty affecting a large majority of the population.

In particular, with regard to bilateral relations, the policy clearly stipulated that Ethiopia will pursue engagement with all other countries on the basis of the principle of mutual interest and respect. Relations with all neighbors over the last two decades have been a testament to the seriousness with which the country has adhered to these principles.

Importantly, Ethiopia believes that whatever differences countries may have, issues of common concern can only be addressed on the basis of constructive engagement, of dialogue and in a manner that allows for a win-win outcome for all.

Ethiopia's relationship with Egypt is one of the many bilateral relations that the government of Ethiopia has been working hard to develop along these principles. Ethiopia and Egypt, of course, have a long relationship, dating back several thousand years. Apart from the cultural and historical ties that have bound them together for centuries, both countries have been closely involved in the cause of African unity over the last five decades. Central to any relationship however has been the Nile river which has been the strong bond tying the two countries and their peoples together for millennia.

Ethiopia was determined that the Nile can and indeed should be a source of cooperation and mutually beneficial relations between Ethiopia and Egypt in a whole number of ways. This has not, however, always been the case. Indeed, the issue of the use of the Nile water has often been a major sticking point in the relationship, a major stumbling block to any sort of robust bilateral link that might have enhanced the interests of both countries.

One of the first and fundamental demonstration of Ethiopia's effort towards cooperation was the Nile Basin Initiative and now the Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement.

The Nile basin countries, except Eritrea and South Sudan, founded the Nile Basin Commission, later Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), in 1999, with funds from World Bank, aiming 'to establish a diplomatic protocol for evaluating the fair use of the river for agricultural and energy projects'. The Commission paved the way for the drafting the 'Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), for the equitable sharing of the Nile waters.

The CFA was signed by six countries from May 2010 up to February 2011 (Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya and Burundi). Ethiopian Parliament passed a law to ratify the CFA and make it part of the domestic law with a unanimous vote. Thereby establishing the first genuinely multilateral treaty regarding the Nile, stipulating for the equitable sharing and utilization of the waters.

Ethiopia attaches great importance to its relations with Egypt, over the Nile as in the area of security. It accepts that Egypt has legitimate interests in the use of the Nile River. Equally, it sincerely believes that the only way any controversy over the use of such a

common resource can be settled is through dialogue and the principle of equitable utilization of the water, without causing significant harm to others.

This is why Ethiopia has so strongly supported the Nile Basin Initiative and now the Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement, negotiated among the Nile riparian countries over the last ten years.

Ethiopia's commitments had been glaringly reflected with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam project. When Ethiopia officially launched the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam project in April 2, 2011, the Egyptians who were still occupied with the revolution that ousted Mubarak a month earlier were taken by surprise.

That gave the impression that Ethiopia came up with the project after the downfall of Mubarak - a conspiracy theory often heard and reiterated by some foreign media.

To the contrary, records show that most of the issues pertaining to the dam project had been the subject of intense study as far back as 1935 and include companies from USA, Sweden and others.

As summarized in one report:

A US and Ethiopian joint project, titled: USA-Ethiopia Cooperative Program for the Study of the [Blue Nile] Basin, (1959 – 1964), produced a comprehensive report on the hydrology, water quality, hypsography, geology, sedimentation, mineral resources, land resources, ground water and the local socio-economic situation. That study proposed four dams downstream with a total holding capacity of 51 bcm as the annual rate. The master plans for the Blue Nile [Abbay], Tekeze [Atbara] and Baro-Akobo basins were completed in the 1990s, according page 166 of the same book. Recent planning activities include: In October 2008 'extensive surveying had been conducted; in September 2010 studies for a Hydroelectricity plant had been completed; in Nov. 2010 the final study was completed and submitted to government.

The Egyptian People's Diplomatic Delegation

The first and crucial step taken after the launch of the project was the reception of the Egyptian People's Diplomatic Delegation. In mid-2011, Egypt sent a 48 person delegation named "Egyptian People's Diplomatic Delegation".

The delegation was headed by Moustafa El Gendy and comprised three presidential candidates, independent political activists, representatives of different political parties and movements, members of parliament, politicians, jurists, public figures, members of the academia, media representatives and members of the Youth Movement of the Egyptians Revolution former parliament members, community leaders, journalists from Egypt and other Arab countries and other public figures from Egypt.

The Public Diplomacy Delegation met with the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi and received the following pledge (as reported by Ahram Arabic in May/2011):

The Prime Minister stressed that he had seen several models of dams and that he was keen to choose the model that generates electricity only and does not remember running water in irrigation of agricultural land.

“I say to the Egyptians that this dam is beneficial to Egypt and the Sudan and will not hurt in any way. Yet, in order to reassure the Egyptian people and thereby eliminate all the doubts created by former regime of Egypt, I accept the formation of a committee of experts, consisting Ethiopians, Egyptians, Sudanese and other foreign experts, to examine the dam project and to make sure it will not cause any damage to Egypt and Sudan. Although I am sure of that, I sure you I am ready to modify the project if the Committee concludes to the contrary. “

Ethiopia gave Egypt time to elect a new government, though it was made it clear that the formation of the Experts Panel should not be taken a decision to stop or delay the dam.

The International Panel of Experts was established months later and started work, while Ethiopia continued building the dam 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

It is to be recalled that the IPoE’s Final Report reconfirmed that:

"The design and construction of the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam has been properly based on international design criteria and standards, codes, guidelines and engineering practices. The Panel’s report also showed that the GERDP will not have a significant impact on the downstream countries and that it will in fact, provide major benefits to all three countries.

The Panel did also recommend two further studies be carried out in the context of the Eastern Nile System. These were a water resource system/hydropower model and a trans-boundary environment and socio-economic impact study. It suggested these should be done through an agreed arrangement of the three countries, employing international consultants chosen through an international bidding process.”

Even though, there has been reluctance at the beginning, Ethiopia patiently insisted on going ahead with the panel's report and eventually Egypt started talking about setting up a mechanism for following up on the implementation of the recommendations of the Experts' Panel

Therefore, the ministers of the three countries - Ethiopia's Ministry of Water and Energy AlemayehuTegenu, Egyptian Minister of Irrigation and Water Resources Mohamed Abdel Moteleb and Sudan’s Minister of Water Resources and Electricity MoatazMoussa

- started discussions on the implementation of the recommendations made by the International Panel of Experts.

The first and second meetings took place in Khartoum during November 4 and December 8-9, 2013. The discussions during the first and second tripartite meeting focused mainly on the framework for establishment of a committee of national experts, composition and mandates. During the two meetings the parties have agreed on setting up a national committee of experts, composition and number of delegates from each country including on most of the mandates proposed by the Ethiopian delegation

The 3rd meeting took place once again in Khartoum during January 4-5 2014 and discussed on the remaining pending issues that were not agreed upon in the last two meetings. However, it was concluded without striking a deal on the agenda. Since then, the tripartite Water Ministers' talks were frozen. However, recently, hopeful signs started to be seen from Egypt side.

Later on June, on the margins of the 23rd African Union Summit in Malabo, Ethiopian Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, and the new Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi held discussions covering a wide range of bilateral, regional and continental issues.

High on the agenda was the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Prime Minister Hailemariam reaffirmed Ethiopia's determination to ensure the project provided mutual benefit, retreating assurances that the construction of the Dam would pose no significant harm to Egyptians, as has been clearly stated by the report of the International Panel of Experts, emphasizing that the construction of the Dam is solely for power generation.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi renounced the past practices of former Egyptian governments to try to destabilize Ethiopia and declared that his administration would not continue these "obsolete practices." On the contrary, he vowed to oppose any anti-Ethiopia forces bent on destabilizing the country. Prime Minister Hailemariam welcomed and commended the new Egyptian administration's will to cooperate and to encourage collaboration.

In a joint statement on the outcome of the discussion, read by Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Dr. Tedros Adhanom, and Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to enhance bilateral relations based on the principles of cooperation, mutual respect and the achievement of common interests.

They also agreed to start preparatory work for a Bilateral Joint Commission with the aim of implementing this within the next three months. The two sides agreed to respect the principles of dialogue and cooperation as the means to achieve the necessary win-win scenarios and provide priority to establish regional projects to meet the rising demand for water and to mitigate water shortages. Both countries also agreed to respect the principles of international law and immediately resume participation in the Tripartite Committee on the Grand Renaissance Dam.

That paved the way for the implementation of the recommendations of the International Panel of Experts (IPOE) and provided for acceptance of the joint technical studies recommended in the IPOE final report throughout the implementation phase of the project. The joint statement also revealed that a decision had been taken to form a Higher Committee to look at all dimensions and elements of the relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt at bilateral and regional levels in the areas of politics, economics, social affairs and security.

As a result of the understanding reached between El Sisi and Hailemariam, the fourth Tripartite Ministerial Meeting of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) was held in Khartoum and was completed successfully. Prof. Dr. HossamEldin Mohamed Moghazy, Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation of Egypt; AlemayehuTegenu, Minister of Water, Irrigation and Energy of Ethiopia; and Ambassador Mutasab Musa AbdallaSalim, Minister of Water Resources and Electricity of Sudan, attended the meeting.

The joint statement of the three Ministers stated that they reached an agreement to establish a technical committee to conduct the two additional studies as recommended in the International Panel of Experts (IPOE) report.

As explained by spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry Amb. Dina Mufti, the Ministers agreed to form a committee consisting 12 members, four from each country, to conduct joint assessment about social and environmental impacts of the dam on downstream countries. The establishment of the group and conducting joint assessment on the dam will be a good opportunity for Ethiopia to prove that the dam wouldn't pose any negative impact on the downstream countries.

Similarly, the joint statement of the Ministers stated that the proposed Tripartite National Committee (TNC) will conduct the studies recommended by the Panel. The studies will cover a Water Resources/Hydropower System Simulation Model and a Trans-boundary Environmental and Socio-Economic Impact Assessment. The Ministers also agreed on the nomination of International Experts who would be able to provide technical opinions in case there are disagreements among the Ministers over the outcome of the two studies.

At last, it shall be noted that Ethiopia's approach to the GERD Project, as it has repeatedly emphasized, is essentially based on the principles of four pillars: a win-win approach, equitable and reasonable utilization, no significant harm and genuine cooperation. The sole objectives of the GERD are poverty eradication and support for regional integration.

Energy generation from the GERD will enhance regional and economic integration through power interconnections, demonstrating regional cooperation, trust and confidence building. In addition, among the major benefits to downstream countries, GERD will hold back a very substantial element of the huge quantities of sediments carried by the Blue Nile.

This will significantly increase the reservoir capacity of the Aswan High Dam as well as protecting irrigation canals and equipments from damage in both Sudan and Egypt. It will check the destructive floods that have so often hit downstream countries by regulating the flow of the Nile throughout the year and will support the flow arriving at High Aswan Dam.

GERD, in fact, will have multi-fold beneficial applications throughout the region. Its completion and success will provide a source of hope, power and prosperity for the region and a very real symbol of regional integration.

As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said a few months ago:

The GERDP is a flagship project of the Government and people of Ethiopia. The project is based on detailed studies by internationally renowned consultants and the decision to commission the construction of the project was made after fully ascertaining the project's technical and socio-economic viability. The People and Government of Ethiopia are financing the GERDP. The GERDP will be completed as planned and no one should be under any illusion that the resolve of the Ethiopian people will weaken or change.

It seems relevant to quote the remarks of the late PM Meles Zenawi as it captures both the determination and goodwill of Ethiopia:

On the date of the launch of GERD, he underlined the determination saying that:

"[there are two options] Either to abandon the project or do whatever we must to raise the required funds. I have no doubt which of these difficult choices the Ethiopian people will make. No matter how poor we are, in the Ethiopian traditions of resolve, the Ethiopian people will pay any sacrifice. I have no doubt they will, with one voice, say: "Build the Dam!"

Nevertheless, he didn't forget to reiterate Ethiopia's commitment to cooperation and principles of good neighborliness and that dam project was planned with such constructive and rational spirit of brotherhood.

He explained:

"The benefits that will accrue from the Dam will by no means be restricted to Ethiopia. They will clearly extend to all neighboring states, and particularly to the downstream Nile basin countries, to Sudan and Egypt.

The Dam will greatly reduce the problems of silt and sediment that consistently affect dams in Egypt and Sudan.....The Renaissance Dam will increase the amount of water resources available, reducing the wastage from evaporation which has been a serious problem in these countries. It will in fact ensure a steady year-round flow of the Nile. This, in turn, should have the potential to

amicably resolve the differences which currently exist among riparian states over the issue of equitable utilization of the resource of the Nile water.”

We hope the Ethiopian public delegation team will sufficiently communicate this spirit to our Egyptian brothers and sisters.