

# Nothing new in the recent Ethiopia and Egypt “new agreement” on Grand Renaissance dam

(Simon Hailu)

Last week, when Egypt's Foreign Minister concluded his visit to Addis Ababa with a joint statement, the international media was full of positive news reports of rapprochement between Ethiopia and Egypt.

BBC's news said: "Egypt and Ethiopia vow to defuse Blue Nile dam row". "Egypt and Ethiopia agree to bridge dam divide", AlJazeera claimed, "Egypt and Ethiopia try to roll back threats of war" CBS heralded.

For the average reader, it may seem the two countries arrived at a new type of agreement. It may also seem as if both of them have been advancing unconstructive positions and making hostile and unhelpful remarks.

In actuality, it was merely one more demonstration of the outdatedness of Egypt's old Nile policy and a re-affirmation of Ethiopia's long-established foreign policy of mutual cooperation.

The center of the recent hype is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam project, which lies a few kilometers from the Ethio-Sudan border, on the Blue Nile, which is the main source of Nile river.

The project is now more than 21% complete and expected to start generating 600MW by 2014 and 6000MW by 2017 when it is finalized.

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Egypt currently relies for almost 95% of her consumption and agricultural needs on Nile river, as she didn't start utilizing the ground water resources in the western Egypt and desalination technology to make use of the Mediterranean sea.

Therefore, the dam project caused a media hype in Egypt in April 2011, when Ethiopia officially launched.

The Egyptians who were still occupied with the revolution that ousted Mubarak a month earlier were taken by surprise.

Though it attracted little media attention, Egyptian scholars and politicians publicly mulled about military strikes and sabotage at that time both in conferences held in Cairo and on the media.

Finally, however, Egypt sent a 48 person delegation named "Egyptian People's Diplomatic Delegation".

The delegation was headed by Moustafa El Gendy and comprises 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):

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*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 hurts 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. “*

*He added, “this decisions is taken now come out of respect for the Egyptian people and the revolution and the delegation of public diplomacy and to reassure the Egyptian people for whom we have all the respect and appreciation”.*

However, the Ethiopian government made it clear that the formation of the Experts Panel should not be taken a a decision to stop or delay the dam.

Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately issued a statement stating:

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*“some[media outlets] tried to read too much into Prime Minister Meles’ assurance that...experts from both countries to come to see just how advantageous the project would be to downstream countries. There were suggestions that Ethiopia had agreed to freeze the project....*

*This is absolutely erroneous. Ethiopia was making a goodwill gesture, involving no formal overture to the Egyptian government....*

*It certainly doesn’t mean Ethiopia is giving up on the Dam project. Ethiopia believes that a clear understanding of the benefits of the Dam will further facilitate cooperation between the two countries.”*

A week later, at the end of the visit by Egypt's Prime Minister Essam Abdel Aziz Sharaf, a joint press conference, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi reiterated that “the construction of the dam won’t be delayed even for a single minute.”

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.

But it seems the Egyptians took it as if the dam project was put under question mark, until the experts committee “approves” it.

For example; Egypt's Minister Irrigation and Water Resources, Dr. Mohamed Bahaa El-Din, indicated that to Egypt newspapers last April (as reported on Danielberhane's Blog on April 29, 2013):

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*“In a separate remark to an Egyptian paper published on Sunday, Dr. El-Din claimed that Ethiopia will not build the dam until the the Panel completes its work.*

*He said that what is being reported about the Renaissance dam construction is “just digging the foundations and related works”.*”

However, it was clearly stated on the terms of references of the Panel that its mandate is solely assessing the impact of the dam on lower riparian countries and presenting its findings to the concerned governments: That is; Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan.

Some of the Egyptians seem to have been too busy with political and economic turmoil to follow-up the matter. Others might have thought Ethiopia would not be able to make much progress on this 4billion dollar project without foreign finance.

That is may be why, they didn't pay attention when Ethiopia's officials repeatedly indicated since last February that the diversion of the river is to be conducted soon.

It was reported on the state-owned newspaper Ethiopian Herald in the fist week of April/2013 that:

*“What makes the completion of its construction insight is the fact that the two major activities that are crucial in accomplishing the project are well in progress.*

*First, the river diversion works. [The work includes] a 120 m wide,*

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*1,100 m long diversion channel excavated on the right bank of the river, discharging wet season flows (14, 700 m<sup>3</sup>/s) and 4 box culverts located at the dam foundation level on the left bank of the river, capable to discharging the dry season flows (2,700m<sup>3</sup>/s).*

*Then again, the major section of the dam would be the reservoir, which would be realized by the construction of a concrete gravity dam, a gated spillway and a rock-fill Saddle Dam with an emergency spillway in correspondence of its right abutment.*

*On the second anniversary, it was also announced that the construction of the concrete gravity dam, will soon be commenced following the completion of the water diversion work.”*

In line, with these public statements and the project time-table, the water diversion work conducted last month.

On May 28, 2013, the Ethiopian government officially announced that it conducted diversion of the river to make way for the dam construction. A common task in the process of any dam construction work.

However, confusingly, some Egyptian officials started expressing “shock” and “surprise”.

Three days later, the International Panel of Experts' held its last session in Addis Ababa and issued its final report the same week.

The report document is to be kept secret until the the three governments discuss on it.

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Ethiopia immediately accepted the report with issued a statement saying:

*“the report indicates that the design of the GERD is based on international standards and principles....The report showed that the Dam offers high benefit for all the three countries and would not cause significant harm on both the lower riparian countries.*

*“the panel of experts has suggested additional assessment on the possible impact of the GERD as well as proposed ideas that would help the basin countries’ benefit better from the Dam.*

*“The government would carefully assess the report by the panel of experts and facilitate cooperation forums to work together with lower riparian countries for common benefit”.*

The reaction from Egypt, however, caused the biggest media hype on the matter in two years.

The hype that began with the news of the river diversion was further heightened when the President called opposition parties for a dialogue on the report.

In the “secret” meeting, where some of the participants are said “unaware” that it was being live transmitted on TV, they were seen suggesting measures such as sabotaging the dam, destabilizing Ethiopia, aiding insurgents, launching direct military attack, etc.

The meeting and its airing on TV demonstrated that Egypt's officials have no real and sensible game plan for the Nile water issues. It was an

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international scandal that made the people think that the President is mismanaging the country, the Nile issues and acting softly.

Therefore, he made a short-sighted political calculation that he should join the hostile rhetoric. He said: "If our share of Nile water decreases, our blood will be the alternative"

The President and his top officials stepped up their rhetoric officially asking Ethiopia to halt the dam in the following days, culminating with President Morsi saying the alternative is our blood.

However, the heightened rhetoric in Egypt caused suspicion among pundits as it was not based on any clear reference to the report or any other scientific basis rather simply on the river diversion.

Indeed, the diversion of the river was a wake up call for Egyptian pundits who were under the impression that Ethiopia can not make much progress in the project.

Moreover, it was a clear signal that Ethiopia will press ahead with the project no-matter what Egypt says, without closing the room for joint efforts if necessary.

However, Egypt failed to clearly state the problems of the dam besides general claims of fear.

Cairo didn't seem to like the general conclusions of the Experts' report that the dam project won't pose significant harm to lower riparian countries.

Yet, she demanded further studies and dialogues recommended by the

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report to be conducted. Something Ethiopia has already consented to.

Ethiopian FM told an European official last week, who apparently relayed Egypt's concern about the diversion of the river, that Cairo's hype about the re-routing is a ploy to divert attention from the Experts' report.

He said (as reported that by the Ministry's weekly newsletter):

*“On the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and recent statements from Egypt, Dr. Tedros expressed his concern over the path that Egypt appeared to be taking. He stressed that Ethiopia was building the Dam to address its burgeoning energy demands.*

*It had repeatedly made clear that there would be no appreciable harm on Egypt.*

*In order to address the concerns of lower riparian countries, Ethiopia had taken the initiative to establish an International Panel of Experts, Dr. Tedros said, and the panel in its report had made quite clear that the Dam would not harm the lower riparian countries.*

*He also noted that Egypt was quite aware that the re-routing of the course of the Nile during the construction process of the Dam was a perfectly normal element of construction.*

*Dr. Tedros suggested that Egypt's current efforts to politicize the re-routing process were being made because it knew the report of the International Panel of Experts would be positive.*

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*Dr. Tedros underlined that Ethiopia has been trying to close this chapter of playing a zero-sum game. It was anxious to open a new chapter.*

*The statements from the Egyptian side as well as the way it was currently mixing the Nile issue with domestic politics were not helpful for the people of Egypt, he said.*

*Ethiopia wants to get on the right track, starting with the report of the International Panel which had explicitly stated that the Dam would offer significant benefits to Egypt. Dr. Tedros also emphasized that Ethiopia would never halt or delay construction of the Dam.”*

On the other hand, several international pundits suggested that the hostile remarks are an attempt to divert attention from domestic crisis and avert the “rebel movement” (of Egyptian opposition) which gathered about 15 million signatures and planning a major rally on June 30.

Whatever the objective might have been, it was clear that the rhetoric can not last forever.

Thus, Cairo sent her foreign Minister this week to Addis Ababa. The much-publicized visit was stated in the following paragraph of the joint statement:

*“With regard to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, both ministers agreed, as per the Terms of Reference of the International Panel of Experts, to immediately initiate consultations among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, on how to move forward with the implementation of its recommendations, including the recommended*

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*studies to be conducted.*

*In this regard, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia welcomed the Egyptian initiative to begin consultations amongst the Water Resources and Foreign Ministers of the three countries, at the technical and political levels, to ensure the implementation of the above-mentioned recommendations.*

*The Egyptian Foreign Minister expressed Egypt's concerns regarding the possible effects of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on Egypt's water use.*

*The Ethiopian Foreign Minister, on his part, assured his Egyptian counterpart that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which will be used for power generation purposes, is being built in a way that addresses Egypt's water security concerns.*

*In such context, both Ministers agreed to take into account the developmental interests of Ethiopia as well as the water security concerns of downstream countries.*

*Both Ministers, in a spirit of brotherly relations and mutual understanding, agreed to embark on consultations at the technical and political levels, with the participation of the Republic of the Sudan, to implement in a speedy manner the International Panel of Experts' recommendations.*

*In this context, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia reiterated Ethiopia's previous position, which is committed to a win-win*

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*approach as the basis for future cooperation.”*

For a careful observer, however, this is the same thing that Ethiopia promised to do two years ago on May 2011, when Prime Minister Meles Zenawi met the Egyptian Public Diplomacy team.

Ethiopia won't delay or stop the dam, yet she is is not willing to conduct joint efforts to minimize impacts downstream.

The agreement reached last week is nothing but a re-affirmation of Ethiopia's scientific and far-sighted foreign policy. Not a new invention!

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