

WATER IS LIFE... FIGHTING FOR THE NILE WATERS

by G. E. GORFU

The recent conference on sharing the waters of the Nile held in Entebbe, Uganda, is quite interesting in many ways. Lake Victoria is a body of water surrounded by three nations: Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, where more than half perimeter shores of the lake are in Tanzanian territory, and the other half is shared between the other two in a ratio of two to one, with less than a quarter of the perimeter shores being in Kenyan territory. (See map)

The 'White Nile,' so named because, unlike the 'Blue Nile,' is free of mud and debris for the most part, and making up between 10 – 15% of the total waters of the Nile, varying with the seasons, starts in Lake Victoria. The other 85 – 90% of the water comes from 'Blue' Nile, because it is muddy, loaded and rich with soil and silt from the mountains and highlands of Ethiopia. Even though the Blue Nile has many tributaries, the greater part of the water comes from one source, Lake Tana, in Begemeder and Godjam.

Another interesting issue that has come up in this conference is the 1929 treaty signed between a colonizer and the colonized, Great Britain and Egypt, none of whom now own the sources of the water. It is also interesting how 'Egypt has reportedly said that any effort to alter the terms of that colonial treaty would be regarded as an act of war'. (1) According to this treaty, "Without the consent of the Egyptian government, any irrigation or hydroelectric works can be established on the tributaries of the Nile or their lakes, if such works can cause a drop in water level harmful to Egypt..."

An Egyptian official in the conference, Mr. Yousef, is reported saying: "Irrigation is something we must reach an agreement about, because it drains a lot, and maintaining a constant flow of water is very important. People will die without it." (2) One would like to remind this gentleman that our people too (in Ethiopia and the other Nile nations), are, and have been dying for lack of water for many decades. How dare you tell us not to irrigate our land, drink our water, the water that is in our nations, and passes through our land, while our people are dying, and to leave it for you, so that your people may not die?

"In 1989 the Israelis were forced to withdraw their hydrologists and surveyors from Ethiopia in the face of threats of war in the Egyptian people's assembly. The Israeli experts were looking into the possibility of building a dam on the Blue Nile." (3) And even more interesting might be that, "...in early 1990, Egypt was reported to have blocked an African Development Bank loan to Ethiopia for a project that Cairo feared would reduce downstream water supply." (4) Seven years later, however, Egypt built its own irrigation canal expanding its farms and population into the Sinai desert.

"Unfortunately, some of these decisions have put into question the responsibility and justice of Egypt's stewardship of Nile waters. Indeed, under the pressure of a burgeoning population, the Egyptian government has for two decades embarked on a misguided program of diverting billions of cubic meters of precious Nile water out of basin and into land reclamation and development projects in the Sinai desert.

One of the most costly and politically and economically dubious of these efforts is a huge land reclamation project in the North Sinai desert called the North Sinai Agricultural Development Project (NSADP). The North Sinai development is currently estimated to cost about \$1.5 billion (about 5 billion Egyptian pounds) and is going forward despite the warnings of its own environmental impact study. Since 1987 this project has been diverting Nile water to agricultural development plots west of the Suez Canal. (5) "The late president Anwar Sadat conceived of the canal -- which he called the Salaam, or Peace, Canal -- years ago after Israel returned the Sinai to Egypt. Sadat hoped that by populating the mostly-uninhabited desert it would be more definably Egyptian in character. Some thought he planned eventually to sell the water to Israel..." (6)

What does Mr. Yousef have to say about this and all the other irrigation canals in Egypt? Do they also “drain a lot”? If it is ok for Egypt to build irrigation canals in order to feed its people, why is it an act of war when the other Nile nations want to do the same? Why then is Egypt making threats, calling it ‘an act of war’, and waving a 1929 treaty? Well, the sun set on the British Empire a long time ago and, in fact, it is no longer the Great Britain we learned about in school, but has been re-baptized ‘The United Kingdom.’ And Egypt entered the treaty not with the nations that own the source of the Nile waters, but with a European power that no longer rules Africa. So, where does this leave us?

Clearly, it is a treaty that died of natural causes when the colonizing power gave up its authority and the colonies gained their independence, and became nations. Egypt appears to be trying to revive a ghost-treaty, in a futile attempt to secure something that does not rightfully belong to it. Sovereign nations that have the lakes and waters in their lands have no reason to seek Egypt’s “consent” in order to build dams or hydroelectric powers in their lands, unless Egypt has ambitions of becoming a new colonizer on these African nations. That, in a simple sentence, is where it leaves us.

Ethiopia’s political leadership should not lose sight of historical perspectives here. Egypt has always tried to destabilize Ethiopia in every possible way. It has always clandestinely helped, and continues to help, many opposition and secessionist forces and organizations against Ethiopia with moral and material support. The logic here is obvious. As long as Ethiopia is embroiled in internal and external strife, it will not have the resources for developing its waters. This then is calculated to guaranty the unrestricted flow of the Nile down to Egypt. In the meantime, Egypt continues to build grand projects of irrigation canals, hydroelectric dams, and power stations, and makes threats of war against any nation that entertains any thought of developing these waters on their sovereign lands. If one wants to solve this problem ones and for all, one needs to see beyond the small time secessionist surrogates and bandits and focus on the real enemy behind them, – Egypt!

Finally, we have it in our oral history, though unmentioned in most history books of today that our ancient Axumite kings used to collect tribute from Egypt for the waters of the Nile. At one time, Egypt had refused to pay tributes and our gallant ancestors had marched to Khartoum and cut off the Nile, and diverted the waters to flow to Senaor, the northern desert in the Sudan. The word Khartoum actually comes from ‘kirtim’, which, in Tigrignia, literally means to cut off. The Egyptians then begged for mercy and resumed paying tribute, at which time the barriers were removed. Even more recently, at the time of Emperor Zera Yaekob, (14th and 15th Century) Egypt refused to send a Patriarch to Ethiopia and had harassed its Christian subjects and burned their church, whereupon the king rebuked the Sultan of Egypt for harassing Christians and threatened to cut off the Nile. The Sultan complied immediately and sent, not one, but four Patriarchs. (7)

It is still in living memory when Ethiopia used to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to Egypt, and for close to two thousand years at that, because our political leaders and those in the Church organization felt they were incapable of producing their own Patriarchs, and kept importing Arab Patriarchs from Egypt to officiate in domestic religious as well as political matters. To his eternal credit, it was Emperor Haileselassie, who managed to cut off that nonsense once and for all, and appointed an Ethiopian Patriarch.

This world has always been one of war and strife, where no justice, reason, or rhyme ever seems to prevail. If one has oil and the powerful want it, they will come down with their army, weapons, and try to get it. If one has gold and diamonds, they will come and get that too. Now it is water. The tables have turned and Egypt is trying to dictate its terms on the rightful owners of the Nile that they should not build dams or make any development projects ‘without consent’, and is even making threats of war.

Though mistakes have been committed by going back to old colonial maps and treaties as was done in the recent case of Badme, Ethiopia and the other Nile nations should still appeal to the fair sense of the World Community and try to resolve this by all peaceful means. The 1929 Treaty should be rejected and discarded. If judges in the UN Court should choose to go back to an old and dead colonial treaty and revive it, Egypt may be the winner, but it will be the most unjust of all legal decisions of the 21st Century. The rightful owners of the Nile cannot accept such a decision.

If the case is decided in favor of Ethiopia and the other rightful owners of the Nile, it is doubtful Egypt will quietly accept and abide by that decision either, and is most likely to declare a war. It is imperative, therefore, and of the highest importance, that Ethiopia and the other Nile nations immediately form a united front and prepare for that eventuality, to defend themselves by any and all means against an aggressor that seems only too eager to declare a war. This issue might still have to be decided on the battlefield, and the final chapter written in blood on the sands of the Egyptian desert.

G. E. Gorfu.

Notes:

- 1) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3546245.stm>
- 2) Christian Science Monitor, March 16, 2004 edition
- 3) <http://desip.igc.org/WillNile2.html>
- 4) Jessica T. Mathews, "Redefining Security." *Foreign Affairs*, 1989, 68:162-177.
- 5) CNN Jan. 9, 1997 and <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9701/09/egypt.canal/>
- 6) <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=94296208>
- 7) *Layers of Time, A History of Ethiopia*. Paul B. Henze. 2000. Published by St. Martin's Press, 175 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10010