Background

Effective April of 2011, Ethiopia has embarked on a significant power generation project called Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The total cost of the project is about five billion US Dollars and it is totally funded by Ethiopians. Even a penny is not funded by the IMF, the World Bank, the USA, China, or Russia. To be exact GERD is funded by the savings and contributions of the farmers, factory workers, the civil servants, the soldiers, police officers, and the private sector including the diaspora.

With 6.45 gigawatts of electricity, the dam will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa and the seventh largest in the world. The project is now in its last stages of filling the reservoir, which is scheduled to begin this month, July 2020, a time that coincides with the beginning of the rainy season in Ethiopia. The greatest obstacle now is the geopolitical injustice by Egypt, turning every possible stone to wreck the project using various false diplomatic campaigns and bellicose rhetoric.

The Nile River is part of a basin network that connects eleven African countries: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt. Categorically it has two sources. The Blue Nile which is known in Ethiopia as Abbay (meaning Father in Ethiopian languages) contributes about 86 % of the Nile River in Sudan and Egypt. The remaining 20% of the water is the White Nile and comes from Uganda and its tributaries.

Despite Ethiopia’s super significant contribution to the Nile, it has been a victim of Egypt’s misinformation so that the whole world recognizes Egypt as the natural and historical owner of Abbay River (Blue Nile) of Ethiopia. However, there has not been any reason that stopped Ethiopia from using its river other than a financial limitation since Abbay (Blue Nile) travels mostly in deep gorges. Rejecting this reality or taking advantage of the apparent reality, the 1959 colonial treaty brokered by the British gave 75% share of the water to Egypt, 25% to Sudan and 0% to Ethiopia or the rest of eight African Nations.
In a spirit of brotherhood and cooperation, Ethiopia has scaled down its original plan of filling the dam in two years, to a general agreement to complete the process in seven years. Despite Ethiopia’s continued willingness to accommodate Egypt, the two countries are still in diplomatic impasse. Egypt is not willing to let go of its wrong perception that it has a veto and the legal authority to control every aspect of the project by demanding written commitments with myriads of what ifs. One of the what ifs is, should a drought hit, Ethiopia has to sign an agreement to absorb the total effect of water loss.

**Egypt’s Sabotage and Scheme**

In ensuring the effective implementation of the ridiculous treaty of 1959, Egypt has changed its old and failed attempts to control the source of the Nile with newer strategies. In order to continue to be the super beneficiary of the treaty that has awarded Egypt more than the lion’s share of the waters, Cairo has been working diligently to sabotage Ethiopia, so that Ethiopians do not challenge the treaty, or if they do, Egypt uses every geopolitical leverage it has over Ethiopia to make sure that there are no international funds.

The prior PM of Ethiopia, in one of his speeches indicated that the foreign minister of Egypt wrote to about seventy countries warning that no funding should be given to Ethiopia, and doing so would result in conflict with members of the Arab league. In this modern era, Egypt’s subversion on the interest of Ethiopia is manifested in the following four major forms:

1. **Sabotaging Ethiopia’s ability to receive any form of loan or aid to fund any developmental project if it is even remotely associated with Abbay River (Blue Nile).** Since the 1950s, Ethiopia’s effort to get funding from the World Bank or the IMF has not been successful. Egypt’s new role in maintaining stability in the Middle East and its membership in the Arab league have been handy in its successfully blocking Ethiopia from international funding. This is the reason why Ethiopia had to find a way to fund the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) i.e. using internal source of capital. It is on the record that the World Bank refused to finance GERD under pressure from Egypt and its allies.

2. **Providing financial and military support to every form of political movement Egypt sees as a tool to distract the political leadership in Addis Ababa, or the survival of Ethiopia as a nation.** The goal is creating instability. No wonder, Egypt has played the most critical role in financing the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF), which after 30 years resulted in secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia and making Ethiopia the most populated land locked nation.

3. **Forgery of evidence by overcommitting the Nile and brazenly attempting to present the same as a support for Cairo’s claim on the lion’s share of Abbay (the Blue Nile).** Aswan is the world’s second largest dam funded and built by Russia in the 1970s. Ethiopia was never consulted when Egypt took the initiative to build such a huge dam. There was no agreement regarding the relative share of the eleven African countries. Here we are in the 21st century, and Egypt wants us to succumb that its natural and historical water share is measured by the capacity of Aswan dam. When the Toshka project and the hidden tunnels under Suez Canal are factored in, Egypt’s water share goes over the roof because all these excessive uses of the Nile are boldly presented as Egypt’s historic and natural right.
4. Building a huge military to frighten the ten countries away from asserting a claim on the Nile, and threatening with the use of force should any country attempts to challenge Cairo’s unreasonable claims. Evidently the scare tactic did not work for Ethiopia, and filling the reservoir of GERD has become a hot topic knocking the doors of the United Nations, the Arab League, the U.S Secretary of Treasury, the White House National Security and currently the African Union. The current relationship between Ethiopia and Egypt is vacillating between heated diplomatic bickering and distant show of military force.

Egypt’s propaganda machine is fueled by a misinterpretation of what is said to have been written by Herodotus, a Greek historian, or his lack of proper understanding at best. He called the region “the gift of the Nile”. There are eleven countries with changing levels of interest or dependence on the Nile, and I bet that Herodotus was not informed about such details. For example, thousands of years before the British Empire came up with the term Blue Nile or before Herodotus, we Ethiopians call the river Abbay which literally means ‘our Father’ or ‘Father of Ethiopia’. As much as someone considers “Egypt as Gift of Nile”, he/she needs to be reminded that Abay is also ‘the Father” of Ethiopia or Abyssinia’. That predates the birth of Herodotus.

**Egypt not Helping the Nile**

It is not a distant memory that in the eighties, following the Ethiopian civil war that was primarily funded by Egypt, the name Ethiopia was getting associated with drought and famine. The whole world did not have a clue to question why on earth, a country that is a more than eighty percent source of the Nile, suffered from a severe drought of historic proportion. We remember the ‘We are the World Concert’ of the eighties in the US when American artists raised money to help victims of the famine. What was Egypt doing at the time? Funding a civil war in Ethiopia so that an instable and weaker Ethiopia would not have the time and the resource to assert its natural rights on the Nile.

Egypt’s continued destabilizing effort against Ethiopia using Petro-dollars from its friends in the Middle East, and through billions of dollars of economic and military aid it receives from the US, is a classic example of arrogance and economic waste. In the past few months, the Arab league held multiple meetings vilifying Ethiopia. Recently, the IMF provided five billion dollars of loan package to Egypt, and Cairo spent fifteen billion dollars on armament purchase from Italy.

Truth is political instability in Ethiopia contributes to deforestation and drought. Little rain or drought in Ethiopia means, a decrease in the volume of water that flows to the Sudan, Egypt, and the Mediterranean. I have not seen any positive or constructive step by Egypt to counter climate change in Ethiopia by planting at least some number of trees each year. Regardless, they keep demanding, some billion cubic volume feet of water each year. It seems they are clueless that without a concerted effort, Lake Tana, the significant source of Nile can be depleted like any other natural resource.

Currently a significant portion of the population in Ethiopia uses firewood and as a result billions of cubic meters of wood is cut each year. The electrification of Ethiopia helps in reducing deforestation. It will have a positive impact on the volume of water flowing downstream. Today, Lake Tana is invaded with aquatic weed which is presenting serious challenges to the lake. If
lake Tana dies, so will the Blue Nile. Some tributaries from the highlands are drying due to climate change.

Is Egypt helping to a fight in climate change in Ethiopia or things that affect the sources of the Nile like the water weed that is choking Lake Tana No! Rather, as if they were vampires, they prefer instigating and financing civil wars shading bloods of Ethiopians downstream, with the Nile. Read about the war in Eritrean mountains or the Guna Terara in Ethiopia. Egypt simply insists the bloody lions share but never shows an interest in fighting the real problem that could literally kill Lake Tana and Abbay (Blue Nile). Maybe Egypt is reserving to use its aquifers after Lake Tana is depleted.

The real higher ground for Egypt’s Water Policy.

Egypt needs to recognize the changing realities in Africa. There is significant growth in population and it is driving the water needs for irrigation, utility, commercial, and power generation. There are political, economic and technological improvements. What was impossible yesterday has now become practicable. As a result, every Nile riparian nation including Ethiopia sees possible use of the Nile to meet its respective water challenges. Hence, the following are positive mindsets that need serious consideration by Egypt:

1. Egypt needs to recognize that Nile is not its only source of fresh water. There are studies that indicate the ground water reservoir of Egypt, the aquifers, are so huge that should the Nile dries up completely, the country will have sufficient ground water for three to four millennia. Egypt needs to stop relying on the easiest route of water supply at the detriment of the upstream nations. If Libya is doing it, there is no reason why Egypt should not also. Also, Egypt has about 2,400 kilometers of shores with red sea and the Mediterranean. This is a huge potential for desalination of sea water for all use. The country instead, spends fifteen billion dollars on a single military purchase. The wrong water policy of Egypt is costing the sub Saharan Africa a lot.

2. Egypt needs to pave the way for Ethiopia and others so that they do not have to rely only on seasonal rains. At the same token, Ethiopia needs to depart from the easiest and riskiest source of water supply, its rains, and strengthen its diplomacy to let the truth be known that it has the right and the need to make use of the water for irrigation, commercial and municipal use.

3. The leaders of the eleven riparian nations need to sit down and iron out a fair, equitable, and workable agreement regarding their relative share of the Nile for all possible uses. Ethiopia deserves its fair share of Abbay (the Blue Nile) in lifting the nation out of poverty.

Regardless of the lies, senseless choices and aggressive overcommitting of the Nile by Egypt, Ethiopia has not done anything that is contrary to the interest of the two downstream countries, the Sudan and Egypt. Hydropower does not consume water. Unlike the Aswan, the location of GERD is not conducive for agriculture and it is built at the border with Sudan. However, politicians and the media in Egypt are misleading its public that GERD consumes water. We Ethiopians recognize that our water is a vital source of life in Egypt and the Sudan. And we would not do anything that jeopardizes the security of our brothers and sisters in the two countries.
The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is built with this real sense of fairness, brotherhood, and respect for the interest of the downstream nations. GERD is a power generation and not an irrigation plant. However, Egypt which is thousands of miles north of Ethiopia is opposing Ethiopia’s grand project with a cocky mindset to control Ethiopia’s natural right to use its waters in compliance with the international law. In principle, since Ethiopia contributes about 86% of the Nile, it will not be unfair to demand a serious percentage of the water for all use. There is nothing wrong with that. Note, however, that is not the subject of the current controversy.

It is amusing to see all hell broke loose by Cairo only because of a project that does not consume water but flows downstream once power is generated. GERD has a positive impact on the amount of water because of a lower level of evaporation in Ethiopia. The present hostility of Egypt against a power generation plant is a clear indication that Egypt is not willing to make a compromise with the upstream nations on fair and equitable use of the water. In 1999 the ten upstream countries including Ethiopia launched the Nile basin initiative to share the Nile water equitably. Egypt simply refused to join the initiative and demanded that it has a veto over the other ten countries.

If we look at the economy, 100% of the population in Egypt have access to electricity and the number in Ethiopia is only 24%. The Per capita income of Egypt is about 3,000 USD and 640 USD in Ethiopia. We Ethiopians know that Egyptians are not stupid, and they know that GERD does not affect their water. When we read between the lines, we see that their nightmare is the enormous economic impact of GERD on Ethiopia’s ability to embark on future projects. They are determined not to see a prosperous and strong Ethiopia. The actual use of the water for power generation is not the issue at hand, and Egypt is dreaming of scaring Ethiopia away, defying its historical record of failed military adventures in Ethiopia.

Even if Egypt has been opposing the project since its inception, it has now changed its strategy of sabotaging our right to development diplomatically. The current rhetoric has become Egypt does not have a problem with GERD but still Cairo is involved in every form of diplomatic mischief in delaying the schedule for commencing the filling of the reservoir. It seems, Egypt is only after buying some time to concoct and place some new obstacles. God knows what kind of mischief Cairo is planning to carry out during the time it wants extension, should Ethiopia concede to Egypt’s pressure. Cairo could be dreaming that Ethiopia becomes Yemen or Libya so that filling the reservoir becomes history.

When Egypt builds Aswan dam in the 70s for actual use of the water, it did not require an agreement by Ethiopia. When Cairo embarks on the Toshka projects since the 1990s diverting the water from Lake Nasser to its Western Desert, it did not require an agreement of Ethiopia. When Egypt again built a tunnel under the Suez Canal diverting Nile out of Africa, it did not require the consent of Ethiopia or the African Union. It is ironic that Ethiopia has now built the Grand Renaissance Dam for power generation, and they want an agreement that vouches their overcommitting of the Nile.

Voice from the US

That being the background, in February of 2020 the US Department of the Treasury participated in separate bilateral meetings with the representatives from Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The agreement was that the World Bank and the United States would support and attend the meetings in the capacity of observers. The Secretary of the Treasury (an Observer) came up with the
ridiculous conclusion that final testing and filling by Ethiopia should not take place without an agreement with the Sudan and Egypt.

The Secretary of the Treasury also added that the conclusion is consistent with the principles set out in the Declaration of Principles agreed upon between the three countries in 2015. The principle being not causing significant harm to downstream countries. On its twit on June 17, 2020 the White House’s National Security Agency repeated the same position “get the GERD deal done before filling it with Nile River Water”.

**Facts for thought**

While leaving the question as to why an observer takes the role of an adjudicator or while not questioning how a government agency like the US Treasury becomes part of such an international dispute, I would like to bring the following significant facts to your attention so that you stand by the side of the more than sixty million Ethiopians who do not have access to electricity.

It seems the US is bent on siding with Egypt’s wrong claim that it has a monopoly over use of Abbay (Blue Nile) and it has veto over legitimacy of all projects outside of Egypt that have nexus with river Abbay (Blue Nile) or the Nile in general. It is not clear as to how far the government of President Donald Trump would go in appeasing Cairo for whatever Washington is expecting in return. However, I am of strong opinion that every public official in the US cares about what is happening internationally, and has the power to make a difference on the actions of the United States based on truth surrounding the issue between Egypt and Ethiopia.

1. **Fact:** Ethiopia contributes 86% of the Nile and Egypt has been using this water for thousands of years. Egypt rightfully recognizes that Nile is international water but somehow it thinks Egypt is rightful owner with monopoly of use. They have problem in accepting Abbay (Blue Nile) as Ethiopian water and cling only to the lingo ‘international water’ and say things that would mean only Egypt is member of the international community. It is international water and only Egypt can use it and not Ethiopia. In their attempt to undermine Ethiopia’s position, the say Ethiopia does not own the water only because of the God given rain in that land. Note they have zero contribution in the fight against climate change. And I wonder if they would make the same claim on God’s given oil of Saudi Arabia.

2. **Fact:** Egypt relies on the Nile river only because it is the easiest source of its water supply, not because it is the only source. Egypt has huge water reservoirs in its groundwater aquifers that could run the country, with the present level of water supply, for millennia. However, Cairo keeps misleading the world in to thinking that the Nile is the only source of their water supply. Because of the outdated and stubborn outlook of the leadership in Cairo, that is unable to cope with change, Egypt continues to spend billions of dollars on its military to scare away the upstream nations. The recent purchase of military arsenal from Italy of 15 Billion USD speaks volume. If such a huge investment was made on using Egypt’s ground waters, that would have been a great assistance to sub Saharan Africa.

3. **Fact:** Ethiopia relies on rain fall only because it is the easiest source of water supply, and unlike the Nile river, it is risky source of water supply. Whenever there are no rains, the
country goes through cycles of drought and famine that takes millions of lives. The Ethiopian famine of the 1980’s is just one of the many.

4. Fact: As indicated earlier, Egypt sees itself as the only beneficiary of the Nile followed by Sudan. And it has been investing on water development projects with no regard for the possible water need of the upstream countries. The Aswan dam, the Toshka projects and the Suez Canal water projects are built on the wrong assumption that Egypt gets 75% of the Nile. In 1999 the ten upstream countries including Ethiopia and Sudan launched the Nile basin initiative to share the Nile’s water equitably. Egypt simply refused to join the initiative and persisted that it has a veto over the other riparian states.

5. Fact: Wrong water policy of Egypt has suffocated sub Saharan Africa. Ethiopia’s reliance on rain is costing millions of lives because of cycles of drought and famine. These issues can be addressed only with a comprehensive agreement that delineates the rights (shares) and obligations of the eleven riparian countries. As of to date there is no such universal agreement. The only thing out there is the laughable 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan to share the waters 75% and 25% respectively. The agreement completely ignores the water needs of the nine riparian countries including Ethiopia.

6. Fact: There is no agreement and hence there is no fair criterion to measure significant harm. This “principle of significant harm” may be invoked only when an action violates a sharing agreement or affects the natural and historical use of the water. Meeting the unnatural water requirements of the Aswan dam, the Toshka’s or the huge commercial lands of foreign nations in Egypt that use the Nile cannot be part of that natural and historical use. Thinking otherwise is giving in to the forgery of evidence by Egypt. Ethiopia has not yet carried out a project that involves actual water use which in the presence of a universal agreement could be judged with the principle of significant harm. It is mockery that Egypt attempts to deny Ethiopia of using its natural resource legitimately without effect on the amount of water that leaves its boundaries. Ethiopia has the right to continue filling its reservoir using its own judgment and it need not sign any document. Egypt needs to agree to come to the table for a comprehensive agreement. That is when a written agreement becomes compulsory.

7. Fact: According to Worldometer the population of Ethiopia is about 115 million and that of Egypt is 103 million. About 60% of Ethiopians (69 Million) do not have electricity but Egypt provides almost 100% coverage to its citizens. The picture on the first page of this document is an illustration of what life looks like for most Ethiopian mothers; this is how most women in Ethiopia collect and transport firewood. The firewood smoke is also a health hazard affecting millions in Ethiopia. Cutting billions of cubic meters of trees each year is also a significant factor to the expansion of deserts in Sub Saharan Africa. Electrification is a useful instrument in fighting deforestation.

8. Fact: The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is a power generation project aimed at changing Ethiopia’s gruesome reality in the 21st Century, and it has zero water use. The water generates electricity and flows downstream to Sudan and Egypt. It is totally incorrect to invoke “the principle of significant harm” only because Ethiopia intends to fill its reservoir, a process that temporarily reduces the amount of water until the filling is completed, causing no significant harm to the downstream. Once the reservoir is full, Sudan and Egypt will be in a better position to avoid floods using the control at the Grand
dam in Ethiopia. There is no proof that filling the reservoir would cause significant harm to Egypt or the Sudan. Such an argument does not also factor in the lives of our mothers, sisters and daughter who have been carrying firewood in their backs for God knows how long. See the picture on 1st page.

9. Fact: On another perspective, significant harm is when Egypt finances a civil war in Ethiopia, drinking bloody water from a country that contributes 86% its H2O. Significant harm is when over a million population of the northern Ethiopia dies of starvation and the name Ethiopia became synonymous with drought or famine in the 1980s while Egypt smiles at Ethiopia’s wounds instead of brotherly assistance. Significant harm to Ethiopia is also when Egypt embarks on huge water projects without considering Ethiopia’s water needs and at the same time demanding Ethiopians sign a document indirectly to acknowledge Egypt’s recent inconsiderate overcommitting projects like Aswan as a status quo.

10. Fact: When it comes to water, all parties need to be cognizant that cooperation is more reliable than a treaty. Only a mother can give away that last glass of water or that last drop of water to her children so that the children live, and she dies of thirst. Thanks to God, Egypt and Ethiopia are not in that dire situation, and they still have the rains of Ethiopia and the ground waters of Egypt. The answer to the real problem lies in Egypt’s understanding and cooperation with Ethiopia so that there will be no significant harm when the actual use of water becomes the topic, not the present power generation dam.

Conclusion

I believe that my narration illuminates not only the truth about the ongoing problem but also the dirty politics behind. Egypt wants Ethiopia to sign an agreement for temporarily filling the reservoir at GERD with a promise not to do this or that. The goal is to use the temporary agreement as evidence to attribute new meaning to a colonial era treaty or to prove that Egypt has a veto power over the issue. Ethiopia has the natural right to use its waters consistent with international law. There is no proof that the temporary act of filling the reservoir will cause significant harm to Egypt. Hence Egypt is not entitled to any form of written promise.

The question of written agreement will be valid when Egypt becomes a party to a comprehensive agreement with the other ten riparian countries. Once there is a written agreement on the relative share of the eleven countries, the US, European Union, Russia, or China will have concrete criteria to determine if there is an action that would cause a significant harm. Filling the reservoir of GERD is not even in the neighborhood of causing the slightest harm to Egypt.

On the question of the Abbay (the Blue Nile) all Ethiopian leaders be it Emperor Menelik, Emperor Haile Selassie, Colonel Mengistu, PM Meles, PM Hailemariam or PM Abiy have one and correct position. Likewise, on the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, all Ethiopians are united and stand behind his excellency Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed. Our appeal is we want the international community to understand Ethiopia’s correct position and its legitimate right to development using the natural resources in our motherland.

Regards,

Melaku G Woldeselassie (Atlanta)