

Painstaking, promising rafting across the Nile

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Just some 40 minutes after taking off from Addis Ababa airport the plane approaches its destiny and enters Bahir Dar air space with a low altitude providing passengers to admire the beautiful scene of the largest lake in Ethiopia. The eye-catching scene of the wide water stretches 2,156 sq km with 85 km long and 65 km wide, Lake Tana reaches a depth of about 15 meters.

North of the lake lies the town of Gorgora that was once the Abyssinian kings capital during the 16th and 17th centuries. For centuries, the inhabitants of the several nearby towns use the lake for fishing. Small boats carrying tourists and travelers sail to and from the shores of the ancient monasteries sites and villages surrounding the lake. About 50 streams of a range of capacities from the various locations in the north Ethiopian highlands, the largest of which is the Little Abbai, flow into Lake Tana. The number of small islands scattered across the lake gives a gorgeous view for spectators.

Bahir Dar, one of the flourishing cities in Ethiopia, lies south of the lake. At the southeastern corner of the Lake, the water forms a bay about 17 km long and 12 km wide that issues the Abbai, or Blue Nile. From this bay, the Blue Nile most of the time at a reasonably gorgeous pride carrying tons of mud and silt along its course, and at times, mostly in August, turning into a raging giant with a high wall of water pushing destruction in its path, flows in 1,370 km course passing through various gorges and shallows of its homeland to meet the White Nile at Khartoum that originates from Lake Victoria in east-central Africa. The Blue Nile contributing more than 85% of the Nile River provides significance for Sudan then goes downstream to Egypt where it also serves the nation by providing food, producing cash and energy for centuries. The three countries are physically bound by the Blue Nile since biblical times.

Ethiopians have been adorning the grace of the river since antiquity. It is common for Ethiopian parents to name their children both sons and daughters after the river – Abbai. A number of folkloric songs, music and poems in Ethiopia are dedicated to Abbai.

The Nile all together connects eleven countries stretching from Africa's Great Lakes region - Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda - to Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt destined to Mediterranean Sea. The Nile

Basin covers a distance of 5,584 km making it the longest river in the world. The Nile and its tributaries cover nearly one-tenth of the African continent - more than 2.8 million sq km.

Nile is one of world's 263 transboundary watersheds where approximately 40% of the world's population lives that covers nearly half of the Earth's land surface and account for an estimated 60% of global freshwater flow. Since basin links hundreds of millions of people of different countries and provide appropriate ecosystem for managing for food security and various watershed-based services, a considerable number of countries with common transboundary basins have exerted their efforts to cooperate on the use of their common basins.

In deed, international records over the last fifty years show that cooperation among transboundary basins overwhelms records of dispute and conflict. Only 37 acute disputes occurred while 157 treaties negotiated and signed during the stated period. It is obvious that violence over water seems neither strategically rational nor economically viable. Recognizing the vital role shared interest and cooperation could benefit all parties nowadays, trends among basin countries tend to induce cooperation than disputes. Such cooperation is prevalent among countries that share common river basins including the Indus, the Senegal, the Rhine and the Danube.

It is even quite interesting to learn that countries, which are often at loggerheads in serious political issues when it comes to water issue they give the utmost priority for cooperating in protecting the transboundary environment and advancing sustainable regional development. Arabs and Israel in this case are exemplary. Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon have implemented a number of schemes and related plans in attempt to divide water use equitably and develop water projects fairly among them.

However, when considering the relationship among the Nile basin countries, it is a pity that having been victims of colonial treaties they had been more entwined with irrational cloud of fear and suspicion – unable to tap the Nile water for mutual development. Even though, fewer disputes among the Riparian countries over water have existed from time Antiquity, the scar of colonialism that had entrenched erroneous and irrational treaties continue to influence the relationship and glued a legacy of mistrust among the Nile Riparian countries dividing them between upstream and downstream countries.

Europeans regarding themselves as 'agents of change' to Africa has made their presence in the continent throughout history. However, the late 19th and early 20th century was the most notable phases considered as the European Scramble for Africa. It was during this sixty to eighty years period the colonizers had imposed their own rules, obstructed the

indigenous development in Africa, and left scars of conflict and political instability in various parts of the continent.

The historical baggage that the Nile River carries to this date originated due to the blunders and deceptions carried out by the colonizers. It was during that period, the major European powers colonized almost all of the countries of the Nile Basin area except the independent Ethiopia. It was during that unfortunate period, the major European powers, in particular Britain, sought to cement its control over the Nile River through a series of controversial treaties.

Ironically, the colonizers that regarded themselves as 'vehicles of change' have made historical blunder through 'treaties' that could only guarantee their interest while at the same time irresponsibly implanting long-standing unfavorable climate for future riparian cooperation in the basin – tantamount to set a stage for future dispute among the riparian nations.

Though the treaties meant to address African water rights, almost all of them involve at least one European power while condescendingly ignoring or keeping the riparian countries and notably Ethiopia that provides more than 85% of the water of the Nile at a low profile. This is one of the symbolic dispositions of the colonial conquest as it was just a means of showing racial arrogance, humiliating African leaders and their people.

The initial 1902 Treaty between Ethiopia and Britain, the then colonizer of Sudan, was a case in point. Nevertheless, the treaty holds little meaning nowadays, but this agreement was the first historical account engineered by colonizers to incite disputes among basin countries threatening the socio-political and economic dynamics as well as future efforts toward cooperation in the basin. Whether by accident or by British design, portions of the treaty put both parties to ascribe different meanings to the treaty's provision that dealt with the Nile water. In Article III of this treaty the English version reads: "His Majesty the Emperor Menilik II, King of Kings of Ethiopia, engages himself towards the Government of His Britannic Majesty not to construct or allow to be constructed any work across the Blue Nile, Lake Tana, or the Sobat, which would arrest the flow of their waters except in agreement with his Britannic Majesty's Government and the Government of Sudan." The Amharic version indicates as Ethiopia could use the water but prohibited her from obstruction or blockage of the river.

It is worth noting to mention that that was the second time Minilik II and Ethiopia faced similar crooked misinterpretation and mischief in treaties by another European country. Ethiopia encountered similar problem with Italy in the Uccialli Treaty just few years back.

Italy rather than settling the matter in discussion tend to impose by force and subsequently the Italians suffered the most humiliating bloody defeat ever experienced by any colonial power in Africa at Adwa on 1 March 1896. It is plausible to say such mischievous style was the prevailing custom of the colonizers.

Paradoxically, most of the colonial treaties on Nile water were geared towards preventing upstream countries from using their water for any project without consulting the colonizers while the later at downstream need not consult with any riparian states if they choose to do the same. Similarly, the May 9, 1906 agreement between Britain and the Government of the Independent State of the Congo prevented Congo from undertaking to construct any work over or near its Semliki River, which would diminish the volume of water entering Lake Albert. The article parallels the aforementioned 1902 treaty between Britain and Ethiopia.

When considering some of the other colonial treaties on Nile waters one can easily learn the crooked intent of the colonizers as it was solely to divide the land and resources among themselves while preventing the Africans from reclaiming and exercise their rights on the land and resources. In this regard, the December 13, 1906 Treaty known as The Tripartite Treaty entirely by three European countries Britain, France, and Italy on the use of Nile water is notable. The article states that these powers will "act together to safeguard the interests of Great Britain and Egypt in the Nile Basin, more especially as regards the regulation of the waters of that river and its tributaries within Ethiopia". The egotistical notion of the colonizers clearly enshrined in the article which the wording blatantly ignored Ethiopia's sovereignty over its own water resources. As independent and sovereign nation, Ethiopia immediately rejected the agreement by indicating that no country had the right to stop it from using its own water resource.

One of the other nonsensical treaty was the May 7, 1929 Agreement between Britain, then in charge of many riparian countries as colonies negotiated with Egypt on behalf of its colonies. The treaty deviously gave almost the entire allocation of the Nile water between Sudan and Egypt absurdly ignoring the rights of the upstream basin countries that provide the Nile water. The treaty set the foundation to one of the most controversial agreement in Nile water - the 1959 Agreement for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters between Egypt and Sudan. The 1929 and 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan with the blessings of the British signed over half a century ago irreverently awarded Egypt and Sudan the lion's share of Nile water 55.5 billion cubic meters and 18.5 billion cubic meters respectively.

These absurd treaties created absurd claims to Nile water. While the established fact clearly depicts as Ethiopia provides more than 85% of the water of the river and has never made

any claims of a monopoly in contrary Egypt who does not contribute a single drop to Nile water and 97% dependent upon the river claimed a monopoly of usage. Such erroneous claim was materialized notably due to the erroneous colonial treaties awarding the lion share of the Nile water to Egypt. The agreements laid the basis for Egypt for claiming the vast majority of Nile waters for so long and blocking upstream development simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of the other basin countries and setting the stage for future wrangling over the use of the Nile water. The 1929 and 1959 treaties signed without even inviting comment or consent from Ethiopia and other riparian countries. The so called treaties, indisputably, might be the most notorious agreements accorded since the first treaty on basin water held back around 2500 BC between the two Sumerian city-states of Lagash and Umma over the Tigris River.

The 1929 and 1959 scandalous treaties, written with British interests in mind resulting in an obvious favoritism towards Egypt and Sudan negotiated during the colonial era still continue to influence the relations of Nile riparian countries to this day. For so long, Egypt and Sudan were stubborn to maintain the status quo of usage of the Nile waters on the basis of colonial/post-colonial agreements, while Ethiopia and other upper riparian states wanted a negotiated agreement on the basis of equality. Rather than cooperation, the relationship among the Nile basin countries had been stained by rivalry. The basin countries were unable to tackle the prevailing poverty across the Basin by using their common resources for mutual economic wellbeing of the population living across the basin.

One of the grave concerns for realizing the economic well being of the population living in the basin countries is access to power and electricity. The demand for electricity has been on the increase and power shortages have been common occurrence since 1970's. Insufficient supply of electricity is common among most of the countries sharing the basin. Thus expanding water resource developments for mutual benefit are crucial for the Nile Basin grid. However, the basin countries, particularly the upstream nations have so far been unable to tap the Nile water and exploit the huge potential of the basin for development as the same time curtailing the prevalent lack of access to water and energy in upstream countries.

Yet, when considering water resources developments in basin countries across the globe, from the Niger to the Euphrates and the Mekong to the Jordan, nothing has stopped upstream countries from harnessing water resource development for energy and other basic needs. However, the account in Nile basin had so far been antagonistic. For decades, as noted above Egypt under the previous regimes' policies had tried to deny the upstream riparian countries from accessing water resources to their development along the Nile.

Ethiopia has pushed forward her demand to develop water resources through hydroelectric power along the Nile. It was a historical fact that during the Mubarak era, Egypt had exercised her entire power to conspire against the demand of Ethiopia to develop water resources by persuading international donors not to fund projects in Ethiopia related to the Nile River. In the early 1990s Egypt blocked an African Development bank loan to Ethiopia for a dam project over concerns that the proposed dam would reduce Nile water flow. It is known that some Arab countries had tried to block any request from the Riparian countries for support to build projects across the Nile water in favor of Egypt.

Even though Ethiopia and other riparian countries have for long disputed the colonial treaties, it was only towards the end of the 1990's, the riparian nations and international agencies began to advocate for a new Nile water policy with a vision of the future based on cooperation, consideration for the environment and the efficient use of water. After the United Nations and other international organization intervened the inter-governmental Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was established in 1999. It was founded on the premise of brokering a new realistic and equitable agreement for the delegation of Nile water. This initiative has gained enormous international support in order to enact a comprehensive water policy that will promote the advancement of cooperative water sharing without hostilities. Most of the basin countries have signed the Nile Initiative Cooperation Framework Agreement (CFA).

Though at the inception of the initiative Egypt was defiance and reluctant to participate in the NBI, the current government of Egypt is showing its willingness to cooperate with other riparian countries in bringing lasting solutions to the increasing demand of water resources on the Nile river basin.

Egypt has recently signaled an end to Egypt's apathetic relations with Nile Basin countries that characterized the Mubarak era. After recently making visits to Ethiopia and Uganda, Egyptian Prime Minister Mr. Sharaf told the media that "the new government in Egypt, we declared very clearly that we believe we are Africans, and African-African relations are very important for our future and the future of the continent, we are doing now is to create a whole new environment for discussions and exchanging ideas."

Currently, a new environment has flourished for ending the longstanding dispute over sharing the waters of the Nile River. Egypt and Sudan are taking steps towards implementing joint projects with the rest of the Nile basin countries. Nowadays, both Egypt and Sudan are working together with the other nine basin countries for common benefit sharing or cooperative agreement by upstream and downstream countries. Economic and trade relations between Ethiopia and Egypt are developing. Similarly, the multi-level

relation between Sudan and Ethiopia is an all time high. NBI heralds a new regime in the basin - a future that could bring together former adversaries to work for common benefit on Nile water. It has built an atmosphere of cooperation on a range of issues, beginning with the Nile water dispute.

The initiative helps all parties to reach consensus necessary to equitably allocate water resources and thereby encourage development projects along the Nile. Economic solidarity through cooperation is declared in the Nile Basin Initiative as the shared vision by riparian countries to promote cooperation and economic well being.

International organizations including the World Bank tend to be impartial in funding projects without taking side in the Nile water debate, nonetheless there were a number of cases these organizations articulated a position favoring Egypt concerns in Nile Basin. Coupled with such historical blunders and being impoverished for many decades the Ethiopia had been unable from exercising her rights to use her resources to eradicate poverty and impoverishment.

Over the past decade, after implementing a number of successful development strategies focusing on food security and modernizing the country's agriculture and industrial sector, Ethiopia interestingly, is enjoying a decade of healthy growth. The nation is on the verge of closing the old chapter of poverty. Ethiopia has become one of the countries that have achieved fastest economic growth. Ethiopia has experienced remarkable economic development over the past decade, with annual GDP growth rates reaching 11 percent. The country's five-year Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) clearly depicts the government's determination and commitment to eradicate poverty from the country by incorporating a number of huge projects in its GTP, notably by properly using the country's human and natural resources.

Abbai is one of the natural treasures of Ethiopia where the country has made very little use of it. The time has come for the country to responsibly and appropriately use the water for tackling underdevelopment. The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam over the Nile River initiated in 2010 by the Ethiopian government is one of the major projects that could play major and decisive role in realizing the five-year Growth and Transformation Plan and the consequent advance towards the eradication of poverty. The project is believed to improve the country's electric and energy needs by providing for between 65 and 87 percent of the entire power supply the country expects to generate over the period of the plan. The dam is being built not only to serve the country's power needs at the same time it helps to improve living standard of the population by providing economic

opportunity, drawing international investment, and improving the overall affluence and health of a population.

What is more fascinating about the project is it is designed encompassing the spirit of economic cooperation among the Nile basin countries. Among its numerous mutual benefits it provides, curtailing power shortages in the Nile basin grid is one of the core objectives of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The electricity to be produced by the hydropower plant is to be sold with a reasonably low cost to neighboring countries including Sudan and possibly Egypt.

The 145 m tall and 1,800 m long gravity-type composed of roller-compacted concrete dam will have two powerhouses, one on each wing of the dam that share spaces for the spillway. The right power house will contain ten 350 MW Francis turbine-generators while the left will contain five. Supporting the dam and reservoir will be a 5 km long and 50 m high saddle dam. The dam's reservoir will have a volume of 63,000,000,000 m³.

At the inauguration of the project the late Ethiopia's visionary leader Meles Zenawi underscored that 'among the concerns we factored in when we made the decision to build the Nile Dam with our own resources was to avoid any negative consequences for our neighbors and indeed to offer positive benefits for all of them. I would dare to say that nothing can provide a better testimony of our deepest commitment to forge a lasting partnership between all the Nile Basin riparian countries than the building of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.'

The environmental and developmental aspect of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in the Nile Basin grid is enormous. When it becomes fully operational, the dam serves as a vehicle that makes the Nile River a permanent mutual bond among the Nile Basin countries.

However, the initial response from Sudan and Egypt towards the construction of the grand dam was pessimistic. They were worried the dam would reduce the water availability in their countries. In reality, the dam would not reduce water availability to Sudan and Egypt rather it will provide a valuable regulation of water flow in a period of climate change, improve prospects of navigation and regulate water for irrigation in the Nile valley. Both downstream countries would also benefit through water conservation. In addition to providing affordable access to electricity to neighboring countries, it will regulate the level of Nile waters for the basin by increasing the amount of water resources available and reduce the wastage from evaporation that has been a serious problem in downstream countries. The dam 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. In addition, reduction of alluvium, provision of water at a fixed and stable rate and reduction of soil erosion along the Nile course are among the advantages the dam provides for downstream countries in the basin.

Studies conducted by Sudanese government in various fields in the Nile Basin states for more than 25 years depict as the dam has positive impact in the basin grid. Professor Saifuddine Hamad Abdallah, the Sudanese Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, acknowledges the dam would benefit Sudan extensively. The Minister told the media recently that Sudan would make maximum use of this dam, which would reduce clay, whose removal costs millions of dollars, adding that the dam will provide waters at fixed levels that will help in irrigated agriculture, especially in the wake of shortages of rain across the regions of the country.

Professor Saifuddine recognizes that the shortage of electricity power will be compensated from new proposed dams or purchase from Ethiopia which sells power for 50 US cents per kilowatt, which far less than production cost for a kilowatt in Sudan. He stated that the dam will have many benefits for Egypt for it will reduce amount of alluvium in the basin of the High Dam and evaporation.

The Ethiopia government cognizant of the negative notions implanted since earlier times, it has been exerting its utmost efforts to demonstrate Ethiopia has no malice in her Millennium Dam project rather the country firmly believes as sustainable socio-economic development could be achieved through the equitable utilization of the common Nile Basin water resources. It is true that nothing can stop the country from exercising her rights in order to fight poverty, however, the Ethiopia government through a series of public diplomacy has relentlessly tried to assert both Egypt and Sudan as the project is initiated to forge a lasting partnership between all the Nile Basin riparian countries. To confirm its commitment, the Ethiopia government agreed to the formation of a technical team, drawn from representatives of the three countries and embracing international water experts, to evaluate the potential impact of the Dam. The panel of international experts has started its activities since May 2012.

Like Egypt, Sudanese officials previously feared that Ethiopia's mega Dam project would affect the water levels in the River. After series of discussions and public diplomacy, Ethiopia becomes successful in winning the heart of the Sudanese and Egyptian leaders. Interestingly, Sudanese President Omar Hassan Ahmad Al-Bashir acknowledges the

construction of the Renaissance Dam is strengthening the overall cooperation between Sudan and Ethiopia heralding the new environment in the Nile grid that had been stained with long-standing dispute over sharing the waters of the Nile River.

Al-Bashir recently told the press that his country will provide the necessary support towards success of construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Similarly, Egypt's Prime Minister Essam Sharaf says his just-completed visit to Ethiopia has opened a "whole new environment" for settlement of the longstanding dispute over sharing the waters of the Nile River.

At its start, the Blue Nile is bright blue then darkens after it meets the Atbarah River originating in the highlands of Ethiopia pouring a huge amount of eroded soil into the river. Nile Basin experts have underlined that the sediment from the Ethiopian highlands has negative impacts on downstream countries of the Nile. The sedimentations are the main critical problems in water resource management in the Nile Basin. The Dam thus will greatly reduce the problems of silt and sediment that consistently affect dams in Egypt and Sudan, particularly acute problem at Sudan's Fosseiries dam which has been experienced reduction in output. Professor Mohamed Akod Osman, the Dean of Faculty of Engineering, University of Khartoum, stated that the Millennium Dam would have positive impact on Sudan to achieve development and self-sufficiency as the dam would supply water at stable rate throughout the year and reduce alluvium for Sudan by 100 million meter cubic.

Nonetheless, as a manifestation of the nostalgia of the Mubarek-era, the construction of the Renaissance Dam and its multi-level benefits across the Basin grid has encountered a number of negative rhetoric from some Egyptian politicians. It was a historical fact that during the colonial era British failed attempt to control the Nile by both rhetoric and military means continued during the Mubarek era and failed in similar manner. Yet, the nostalgia continued to this day. It is plausible to say that a nation that had been propagated by the Mubarak and previous governments for so long as Ethiopia was trying to block or diminish the flow of the Nile River such fear and mistrust might be anticipated. Such blatant lies were the tools of the previous regimes of Egypt for sowing the seeds of political and social decay that were deliberate attempts to instill, control and disseminate messages among the public designed to imprison the Egyptians thinking with baggage of suspicion and hatred towards their Ethiopian brothers and sisters.

The seeds of negative statements reflected against the construction of the Renaissance dam and the prevalent mistrust among the Basin countries sowed and emanated from the colonialists and the Mubarek regime's approach that used white lies and rhetoric to fuel the

Nile antagonistic issue overshadowing cooperation among the basin countries. But the fate of such lies and propaganda played in the past perceiving the public as ignorance only led the regimes to irreparably loss the public confidence and contributed to brought the famous Arab Spring.

Nevertheless, some of the media and irresponsible politicians have continued to use misinformation through old fashioned tactics potentially endangering to solve the problem of water issue across the Basin. Though, the media is expected to serve the public with credible and factual information, some of the media tend to echo unprofessionally the hatred rhetoric of some politicians who are stubborn to follow the old-fashioned trend contrary to the 21st century thinking, scientific evidence and historical experience. Some of the media and politicians are unable to buy the changes witnessed across the Nile Basin and the region.

The late Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi said following the Entebbe Agreement in 2010 “some people in Egypt have old-fashioned ideas based on the assumption that the Nile water belongs to Egypt.” But, “the circumstances have changed and changed forever.” The political and demographic changes as well as the rapid development witnessed have enabled the nations to work more for mutual benefit.

Recently, the Egyptian Water Resource and Irrigation Minister, Dr. Mohammed Baihaudin affirms the positive elements enshrined in the NBI and the Entebbe Agreement for working for common benefit across the Nile grid. Yet, some of the media including websites managed by Egyptians and Ethiopians rather than responsibly filing positive stories they tend to fuel the old disputes without properly studying the pros and cons inherent in the pronouncements of some of the politician personalities. Some of media even went as far as predicting as war is inevitable.

But what is expected from the media is to maximize positive gains and the constructive changes that outweigh the few negative elements. What Africans want is not the old stereotyping of the African image with conflict and impoverishment rather the current witnessed hopeful changes in various aspects. The nations of Africa should strive to fight some of the media and politicians rhetoric that endangers the hope of Africans and the continent's promising future.

The majority of Africans and notably the countries across the Nile Basin believe as they are moving together to major development. They are fade up with backwardness, dispute and conflict. The media and politicians should realize the current change and learn about the promising trends and to maximize the gains and responsibly play by the rules. The people

across the Nile Basin that shares common culture and history have common destiny that are stronger than the streams that divide them.

The upcoming African Union Ministerial meeting that will be held in Addis Ababa in February will confer on the continent's water resource usage. It is believed that the meeting will maximize the peaceful future that Africa mutually encompasses through its vast body. It is expected to herald the end of the old fashioned prophecies of calamity, gloom and doom. Since such apocalyptic predictions have failed to materialize, it is fools idea not to see the healthier part of the story and not to give up the old rhetorical approach in favor of a discourse based on facts and truth. Only the fool can't see the promising rafting the nations of the Nile Basin countries are making across the Nile River towards mutual cooperation and development.

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