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Egypt looks for 'win-win' situation with Ethiopia over dam

An Egyptian official says altering the dam's impact on Egypt will require more money - and thus maybe funding from other Arab states

Dalia Abdel-Salam
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Egypt entered into negotiations with Ethiopia and Sudan in Khartoum on Monday with the objective of convincing Ethiopia to change the technical specifications of its Grand Renaissance Dam so as not to infringe on Egypt's share of Nile water.

According to Egypt's irrigation and water resources minister, Hossam El-Moghazi, the Egyptian delegation currently in Sudan has a new "vision" to present at the negotiations: explaining the threats the dam with its current technical specifications will pose on other countries.

Cairo and Addis Ababa have been at odds in recent months over the dam, which Egyptian officials say will impact its share of Nile water upon completion.

According to Diah El-Qousi, a water expert, Egypt will never accept the dam with its current specifications or dimensions – a height of 150 meters and a storage capacity of 74 billion cubic meters.

"With the dam's specifications and dimensions, Ethiopia will be capable of completely depriving Egypt of its water supply for one, two or even three years, which is something that Egypt will never accept," Al-Qousi explained.

He adds that the Egyptian delegation has to convince the Ethiopian side to return to the initial dimensions of the dam which date back to 1963.

"[Nile] Basin countries, especially the Ethiopian side, must understand that the Nile for Egypt is not a tool for development but a source of life," said Al-Qousi.

Al-Qousi believes that Ethiopia has made a political, diplomatic and technical error since it started to construct the dam by not agreeing to consider a report issued by a committee of international experts. The report was never made public – but Egypt has given it importance as of late.

Sherif Eissa, head of the Nile water department at Egypt's foreign ministry and a member of the Egyptian delegation in negotiations with Ethiopia, told Al-Ahram that the committee's report found that additional studies should have been made before construction work began to assess its environmental, socio-economic and hydraulic impacts.

"Experts have said that the studies conducted by Ethiopian authorities are Level 1 and that studies of Level 2 were needed to show the impact of the dam on downstream countries," Eissa explained.

However, Ethiopia has begun work on the dam, completing almost 35 percent of the project and finishing work on two generators.

"Until now, Ethiopia self-financed [the project] with a billion dollars from taxes, so that each Ethiopian pays a month of his annual salary for the dam, in addition to the money transferred by Ethiopians who work abroad, those of the Ethiopian airline and foreign aid," said Eissa.

The current phase of the work is the least expensive. The next phase will necessitate more funds and Ethiopia will not be able to finance the project on its own. Egypt is now seeking a compromise with Addis Ababa.

"Egypt does not ask much," Eissa said. "We only want to secure our water supply in the short, medium and long term. We respect Ethiopia's right to development, provided that this right does not affect Egypt's interests towards Nile water."

He explained that Egypt's current aim in the Sudan negotiations is to achieve a win-win round of talks.

"There are many ways to reach a compromise. We will focus during the meetings on the specifications of the dam, the volume of water behind the dam and reservoir and on joint management that guarantees the production of electricity in Ethiopia and the natural flow of water to Egypt," he said before travelling to Sudan.

However, changing the technical properties of the dam so as not to undermine Egyptian interests will require additional funding.

"If Ethiopia will be understanding and cooperative and respond positively to our demands, Egypt will try to convince some Arabs to help Ethiopia finance the project," he said.

The Ethiopian dam in numbers

Project cost: \$5 billion

Dam height: 170 meters

Length of dam: 1,800 meters

Number of turbines: 16

Storage capacity: 74 billion cubic meters of water

Power generation capacity: 6,000 megawatts

Date of inauguration: 2016

58 years in the making

The idea of a great Ethiopian dam dates back to the years 1956-1964, but it was not until 2009 that the Ethiopian government began the work.

The plans were approved in November 2010 and the Ethiopian government officially announced the project at the end of March 2011.

The dam is being built in the regional state of Benishangul Gumuz on the Blue Nile.

With a power generation capacity amounting to 6,000 megawatts, the Renaissance Dam will be the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa when it is finished in 2017-2018.

The exact impact of the dam on downstream countries is unknown. Egypt fears a drop in water supply due to the long duration of refuelling with a projected volume of 74 billion cubic meters.