

Egypt's suggestion that it might use Nile waters to irrigate Sinai has Ethiopia up in arms. If the conflict is not resolved it might come to that, reports Assem Abdul Mohsen from Cairo.

Egypt, Ethiopia clash over Nile

Egypt and Ethiopia are engaged in a tussle over Nile waters that could have serious consequences for Egypt's plans to irrigate the Sinai Peninsula.

Three years ago, in response to reports that the Ethiopians were planning dams on the Blue Nile, Egypt said it would be prepared to go to war to protect its share of Nile waters.

It accused the Soviet Union of encouraging Ethiopia to build the dams, alleging that the aim was to avenge Egyptian moves against the Soviet Union since 1972.

Now Egypt is on the warpath again, charging that the Soviet Union is pushing Ethiopia to take steps which would strangle Egypt economically and bring about the downfall of the Sadat regime.

Ethiopia in turn has complained to the Organisation of African Unity about an Egyptian plan to transfer water from the Nile to the Sinai Peninsula. This plan is a reincarnation of one started in the early 1960s but brought to an abrupt end by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Its aim was to irrigate some 35,000 feddans east of the canal.

Tension among the riparian states on the Nile has been rising since President Sadat remarked recently that there was nothing to prevent Nile waters from reaching the Negev desert in Israel, or even Jerusalem. Former Prime Minister Mustapha Khalil had rapidly to explain to Egypt's own Peoples' Assembly that no concrete plans to convey water to Israel had been made. In fact Egypt needs every drop of water for irrigation and reclamation purposes to meet the demands

of its own population. Moreover, any attempt to transfer Nile waters to a country not within the river basin would be a violation of international principles and bilateral agreements.

Egypt derives more than 82% of its water resources from the Nile and hopes to get an additional 9bn cu.m from joint irrigation schemes with Sudan that will bring its total water resources to 77.1bn cu.m by the year 2000. But even this will probably not be enough. Any drop in Egypt's share of Nile waters - for whatever reason - could be fatal.

Water coming from Ethiopia through the Blue Nile represents 86% of the discharge of Nile waters into Sudan and Egypt. Water coming from Uganda through the White Nile represents the remaining 14%. The two Niles meet at El-Mogran, south of Khartoum, and continue as a single river.

The distribution of water between Sudan and Egypt has been settled since 1959. It was then that the two countries, with work on the Aswan High Dam about to start, agreed that net storage of water in Lake Nasser (behind the dam) should be based on an average annual river flow of some 84bn cu.m.

Of this amount, 52bn cu.m was to be excluded, since this represented the established combined irrigation needs of the two countries before the agreement (Egypt getting 48bn cu.m and Sudan 4bn cu.m). The 1959 agreement was thus mainly concerned with the extra 32bn cu.m provided by the dam. Of this Egypt was to get 7.5bn cu.m and Sudan 14.5bn cu.m, the remainder being lost through leakage and evaporation.

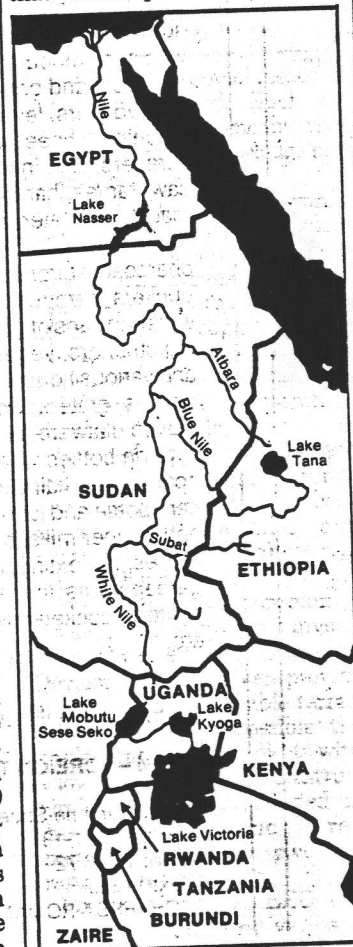
What remains to be settled

now are the respective rights of Egypt and Ethiopia to do as they wish with water passing through their own territory. According to Egyptian Irrigation Minister Muhammad Abdel-Hadi Samaha these rights depend on whether a country lies on the river estuary or at its source.

Obligations: Samaha says there is no law obliging a country on the estuary to consult any other country before exploiting the river inside its own borders.

He says the only case in which estuary countries are obliged to consult countries upstream is when they think of building a dam that could cause flooding in the latter's territory. Egypt did this when it built the High Dam, thereby inundating parts of Sudan.

On the other hand, Samaha maintains, the law is clear in obliging countries of the source to consult countries downstream before undertaking any work that could pollute the river,



Nile basin countries: Ethiopia sticks on lakes body

obstruct its flow or reduce the latter's share.

He points out that in 1902 Britain, on behalf of Sudan, signed a treaty with Ethiopia preventing it from doing anything to the Blue Nile, Lake Tana or the Sobat River that could obstruct the Nile's flow without the consent of Britain and Sudan.

Another agreement was reached in 1929, controlling the use of river water in Sudan, this time with Egypt in mind.

In the 1960s Egypt and Sudan together called for the creation of a body to carry out hydrometeorological studies of the equatorial lakes. This came into being in 1967, comprising Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi joined later, but Ethiopia has still not joined.

According to Samaha, Egypt is still urging Ethiopia to join this association of Nile basin countries, since this could become the forum for discussion of all issues related to the river.

In the meantime, Egypt has to use its share of the Nile to the full. Under their 1974 economic integration agreement, Egypt and Sudan are engaged in a number of irrigation projects aimed at minimising the loss of Nile water. These projects, including the Jonglei canal, could ultimately give the two countries another 9bn cu.m.

But this is small by comparison with Egypt's long-term needs. All studies indicate that the Nile Valley, as things stand, will be unable to accommodate more than 45mn people by the year 2000. If, as population growth rates suggest, it has to accommodate another 15-25mn people by that time it will need an additional 40bn cu.m of water over and above the 68bn cu.m it already has.

This means that another 31bn cu.m will have to come from under ground, desalination of sea water, more economical use of irrigation water (through drip techniques and sprinklers) and recycling of drainage water.

Because of its needs, developments in other Nile states are of crucial importance to Egypt. Sadat has asked, "If Ethiopia reacts this way when we start to irrigate a few extra feddans, what will they do when we implement our plans to irrigate 1mn feddans in Sinai?" □