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THE NILE-SOURCE OF REGIONAL COOPERATION OR CONFLICT?

KEY- NOTE ADDRESS

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INTRODUCTION

The Nile and the ancient civilizations that it spawns had captured the imagination of mankind for thousands of years. As a case in point, ... Veru in his "Antiquities" stated, that in the legend, as "Queen of the multiple names", "Isis had first travelled as goddess from Ethiopia into Egypt". The ancient Egyptian proverb that "The Nile is the Mother of Egypt" has proved true in more ways than one, and volumes of ancient praise-songs were sung by the Egyptians for the Nile.

The stark reality in recent history, however, is that the development potentials of the Nile has increasingly become important and pressures on its resources has now reached the stage, where countries are obliged to make the River, both an object and instrument of domestic and international politics. I believe that the International Water Resources Association through which I now have the opportunity to reflect some views on regional cooperation on water resources, could also play its vital historic role. Needless to say, on behalf of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and on my own behalf, I wish to express appreciation for the invitation extended to me towards this end.

As a frame of reference, the basin includes parts and entireties of ten countries, namely; Burundi, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, the Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire. The River which drains an area of some 2.9 million km², lies between 4° 15'S and 13° 38' N Latitude; 24° 00' and 39° 47 Longitude; and covers 10% of the

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African continent as it traverses 6,700 km from the Equatorial Lakes to the Mediterranean Sea. The average annual flow of the Nile is estimated to be some 84 billion cubic meters at Aswan of which the Ethiopian sub-basin contributes some 86% of the total flow.

It can, then be surmised that the Basin represents one of the most complex and sensitive hydrological systems in the world with a wide range of climate. Rainfall in the headwaters, although abundant, is seasonal. On the other hand, from about 14° N more than half of the Nile runs through arid and semi-arid areas. It then follows that the integrated Nile Basin development should be perceived as a set of anthropogenic activities which takes place within an interlinked and complex ecosystem. It is thus recognized to represent a very large and highly valued hydrological unit.

Hence, cognizant of the challenges and opportunities that this varied and environmentally fragile ecological entity offers, it must equitably be shared, sustainably utilized and have environmentally sound management for the mutual benefit of the co-basin population. However, these countries have their myriad water ministries or institutions and administrative agencies which are repositories of varied economic interests, and political power. One cannot, therefore, overlook these realities.

As a consequence, the strategic and historical controversial issues that must be attended to, and the framework for a meaningful regional cooperation have to be mutually agreed upon. Therefore, a necessary condition for any discussion on basin-wide cooperative framework is that issues on the Nile be transparent. It is felt that this approach is necessary for an objective exchange of views, which in turn, is a prerequisite for the resolution of apparent misunderstandings and differences with credibility and subsequent accountability.

The opportune moment of the Eighth IWRA World Congress on Water Resources on the burning issue under the befitting and apt theme "Satisfying Future National and Global Water Demand" and the above considerations are central to this key-note: "The Nile-Source of Regional Cooperation or Conflict?". Its major assertion is that we should aim at a genuine effort to promote regional cooperation as opposed to being confrontational.

THE SCENARIO

The relationship between population growth and economic development may be disputed; but the issue is of major importance to the Nile Basin. Given the current population growth, the question to be asked is whether the co-basin countries will be able to maintain a reasonable degree of food self-sufficiency, or whether they become increasingly dependant on food imports. With the daunting and even haunting burden of international debts, one wonders if some co-basin states could attain any meaningful economic development. That as it may be, for most of the countries, the first development imperative is food self-sufficiency in a scenario where the agricultural production of the Basin is governed by alternating periods of water deficiencies and unharnessed surpluses. This would necessitate watershed development and irrigation investments as the lead input. Such efforts would bring about arid and semi-arid areas into production; make dry season crops possible, and boost rainy season yields by promoting a more favourable soil water regime for crops.

No less important is that to build the industrial and service sectors, the overall economy of each country requires increased production per capita. This, therefore, requires efficient high input to make agriculture intensive. This calls for effective investment in land, human resources, and the important input of irrigation water. It is then to be anticipated that in the absence of a comprehensive framework for cooperation, each co-basin state

would aspire to affirm and intensify its sovereignty over the shared water resources and to even lay claim to as much of the natural flow of the Nile as possible. This could lead to such elements as suspicions, lack of credibility, and hostilities, in a setting where governmental jurisdictions represented are quite numerous.

Equally significant are current realities, where as compared to the upper eight co-basin countries, the lower co-basin states, the Sudan and Egypt, have made substantial progress in the utilization of the Nile waters. Concomitantly, some of their water resource agencies have risen to higher state of competence while those in the other states are at their formative stages. Conversely, efforts of the upper riparian states to harness the Nile waters are not that discernible. This is despite the fact that they have the blessings of irrigable land potentials in juxtaposition to the need for food security and employment generation.

Ironically, at the face of the rapidly increasing population, Ethiopia which contributes 72 billion cubic meters or about 86 per cent of the Nile waters, utilizes an insignificant amount despite the fact that the country has been hit by devastating droughts with accompanying famines. A corollary to this is that Ethiopia, by necessity, has to assert its equitable share of the scarce Nile waters in accordance with internationally accepted rules and principles. Equally, other upper basin nations have rights to develop their water resources whose consumption could jeopardize lower basin uses with repercussions to environmental issues. This calls for a logical and realistic response to emerging shifts in national aspirations based on the dynamic interplay of interests and their relationship to environmental and economic concerns. Such competing and at times conflicting claim on the Nile waters need to be streamlined and calls for the search of appropriate mechanism(s) to harmonize future water uses.

THE NEED FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

Today, it is realized that the economic and social development of many Nile co-basin countries is dependent directly or indirectly on the development of their river systems to meet the demand for water and its use as a factor of production in agriculture, industry, or for household activities. Notwithstanding this, the rivalry on the use of the shared but finite resources of the Nile would lead to conflicts of interests, possible establishment by individual states of use rights in a situation of inadequacy of water to all basin states thus creating a seeming "win-loose" but an actual "loose-loose" situation. The issue can become inevitably complex due to the existing large social, technical and economic differences and the priorities accorded by each country with respect to the Nile waters. Therefore, competing development needs for water make it imperative to arrive at an environmentally sound equitable allocation, and sustained utilization of the Nile. Hence, within an accepted cooperation framework, the objective needs and aspirations of each co-basin state need to be addressed to for a meaningful development of the Basin.

In retrospect, there have been various efforts to bring about cooperation among the Nile co-basin countries, most of which have been initiated under the auspices of the UN agencies. Yet, these initiatives have not been success stories since they were not designed to be beneficial to all co-basin countries, as indeed they could never be, so long as their fragmented initiatives were selective and differentiated, narrow in scope, and hence failed to address the real issues involved. Although, most of the initiatives have not been fully translated into reality, Ethiopia does recognize the wide-ranging potential benefit and opportunities that emanate from basin-wide cooperation.

Yet, in view of the above reality, Ethiopia was obliged to only maintain its legitimate observer status in the initiatives where

appropriate. In the process, it has gained the undeserved reputation of posing a non-cooperative and even a confrontational attitude. This is despite the fact that Ethiopia has participated in most of these initiatives and made positive contributions, particularly in the context of integrated development of the Nile water resources as a framework for meaningful cooperation. What is needed, therefore, is a commitment to act in a spirit of goodwill and mutual respect for the legitimate national aspirations of all co-basin countries in which the finite shared water resources of the Nile could be equitably utilized without causing appreciable harm to all concerned such that environmental concerns and sustainable development would be organically linked. As a first step, such considerations have motivated Ethiopia to take the initiative towards a meaningful dialogue with Sudan and Egypt. Impressive headstarts have been made but much is hoped to be accomplished.

In an optimistic note, I wish to reaffirm that if meaningful regional cooperation is to prevail, a comprehensive framework should be designed to benefit all riparian countries and this must be agreed upon. Such an inter-governmental Basin-wide cooperation needs to be institutionalized. The would-be mechanism can only be found through a comprehensive joint efforts as a family of nations to promote a "win-win" situation and even enable the protection of the physical, biological and social environment. In general, the specific areas of concern, strategic issues, the needs, constraints, opportunities, challenges, requirements, etc. constitute consideration for the integrated development of Nile waters and these must be sharp focused. Hence, objectives have to be defined and priorities need to be set on the use of shared water resources within a complex framework of internationally accepted principles, standards, laws, rules, etc.

Under such an arrangement, the needs for developments as irrigation, hydropower generation, flood diversion and/or control,

flow augmentation, ground water development, fisheries, water transport, the sound management of the environment and related issues may be tailored to promote development activities in the context of an integrated action program. No less important, issues of water allocation, priority research areas, and the institutional arrangement to support and achieve the intended objective must also be formulated in a transparent and credible manner. Among others, a panel of experts can be formed, composed of nationals from the respective relevant focal organizations. This body could undertake preparatory works with particular attention to the principles of cooperation, the objectives, activities, powers and structure of the proposed institutional aspects; including the phased development of the would-be inter-governmental organization on the Nile. With such arrangements, an appropriate international body can be selected as the regional focal point to facilitate the work of the panel of experts. Prominent among these are the relevant specialized UN organizations who could assist in the undertaking with the selected regional focal point.

In this context, basic changes in attitudes and the setting of priorities for mutual and multiple benefit would not only be required but are essential. The expression of political will by the co-basin states and the commitment of international organizations would also be decisive. I believe that the consortium of international organizations could not only play a vital role as facilitators and hence catalytic agents offer useful consultative fora but could also provide technical assistance to mobilise support to foster cooperation in the Basin towards sustained development.

I hope that the above presentation is a modest expression of the need and opportunities for cooperation. These are not meant to be exhaustive, nor original, since they have been the basis for general international understandings, and inter-governmental river basin co-operation. What is attempted here, however, is to draw

upon past experiences, as to promote the establishment and institutionalization of a comprehensive framework for cooperation which would address issues that are believed to be important to all Nile co-basin states.

At the risk of being redundant, let me assert that the central issue is the integrated development and use of the Nile water and related natural resources. Within this context wider cooperation in other socio-economic sectors could potentially be perceived with a better likelihood of success. It is with this firm conviction that I feel that the Nile is a source of regional cooperation and not a source of conflict. In our quest for sound environmental management of the Nile all co-Basin countries and the international community can positively prejudice generations to come whose inalienable right is to inherit a future rich in resources that would enable them to live in an atmosphere where peace and democracy would not just prevail but would flourish!

Thank you.