

Trilateral talks resume on Grand Renaissance hydroelectric project

Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia are back at the negotiation table to discuss the future of what will be Africa's largest hydroelectric project, the Grand Renaissance Ethiopian Dam (GERD), but the process threatens to be rocky.



Construction on the dam, which Ethiopia is building, began in 2011 on the Blue Nile tributary in the northern Ethiopia highlands, from where 85% of the Nile's waters flow. However, the project has caused a row between Egypt and Ethiopia, with Sudan caught in the middle.

At the centre of the storm are plans to fill up the mega dam as Egypt fears the project will allow Ethiopia to control the flow of Africa's longest river. Hydroelectric power stations do not consume water, but the speed with which Ethiopia fills up the dam's reservoir will affect the flow downstream. With reservoir capacity of 74-billion cubic metres, the hydroelectric dam will produce 6,475 megawatts for Ethiopia's domestic and industrial use, as well as export to neighbouring countries.

Water rights

The current negotiations are the latest in 10 years of failed talks over the water rights, and were instigated after a meeting of the African Union (AU) Bureau of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government on 26 June 2020, the ministerial delegations of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, supported by technical experts, reconvened on 3 July 2020 to discuss the outstanding legal and technical issues pertaining to the GERD matter.

Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed said that his country will start filling the reservoir this month whether an agreement is reached or not.

In May, Sameh Shoukry, the Egyptian foreign minister, told the United Nations Security Council: "The unilateral filling and operation of this dam, without an agreement that includes the necessary precautions to protect downstream communities . . . would heighten tensions and could provoke crises and conflicts that further destabilise an already troubled region."

Ethiopia has rejected Egypt's claim to "historic water rights" or that "current use" can be used as a guide to how much water the downstream country should receive.

Cairo wants to seal a comprehensive deal to govern the filling and operation of the dam that would include agreed drought mitigation protocols. In February, Ethiopia rejected an agreement drafted by the US and the World Bank after talks in Washington. Ethiopian officials said the deal was biased towards Egypt.

The construction of the 147-metre high, 1.8-kilometre (1.1-mile) long project is expected to be completed by 2023.

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