

## **The Struggle for Control of the Nile**

### **A Water War waiting to come?**

**by Maxim Worcester**

There are growing concerns that water shortages and limited or unequal access to water could lead to conflicts between countries in the near future. Water shortages will also lead to an increase in migration, causing millions of people to move between countries to seek new sources of water. The UN estimates that by 2025 two out of three in the world's population will live in water stressed conditions.

The Nile Basin is such a case in point. The Nile originates in Lake Victoria, has a length of 6000 km and is home to 160 million people. 300 million live in the 10 countries through which the river flows. The use of the water has been a bone of contention between these countries since the days of ancient Egypt but has escalated since the 1929 Nile Water Agreement and the 1959 Agreement for the Full Utilisation of the Nile which gave Sudan and Egypt extensive rights over the river use.

Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania have expressed concern arguing that the treaties have given Egypt unfair control over the use of the river's water. They have a point; Egypt controls 87 % and Sudan 13 % of the water which flows down the Nile in accordance with the Treaty. This translates to Egypt using 55.5 cubic km of water; however Egypt's needs are estimated to be in the order of 65 cubic km of water. Clearly Sudan still lets plenty of water leave its borders unused and in addition Egypt recycles significant quantities to make up for the shortfall.

In 1998 the Nile Basin Initiative was established to find a way to cooperate in sharing the Nile in a sustainable and effective way. Not much other than the production of a lot of paperwork has however been achieved and the thorny issue of water allocation has not been addressed.

Sudan's government has been under attack for the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. At the same time, following the end of the 20-year-long war in the south of the country in 2003, the government agreed to hold a referendum in 2011 which in all likelihood will result in the division of the country into two parts. The resolution of the Darfur crisis could also result in the further fragmentation of Sudan.

The reasons given for the potential fragmentation of the country is oil. Sudan has significant reserves and is Africa's third largest oil producer after Nigeria and Angola. It is estimated that Sudan provides China with 250.000 barrels per day and is its 6<sup>th</sup> most important source of crude oil providing up to 10 % of China's imports of oil. Estimates for total Sudanese oil

reserves lie at 6 bn. barrels. Sudanese sources suggest that vast potential reserves are held in the desert regions of North Western Sudan, the Blue Nile Basin and the Red Sea Area in addition to the rich proven reserves in Darfur and Kordofan.

Erroneously, many observers conclude that this is the main reason why the Chinese government is such a strong supporter of the current government in Khartoum. China has over the past years not only become Sudan's major customer for oil it has also rebuilt the countries armed forces. China has recently supplied Sudan with new generation T96 and T59D Main Battle Tanks and has for the first time exported the T92 Wheeled Infantry Fighting Vehicle equipped with a Russian designed 2A72 30 mm cannon. Sudan has also purchased F7M, J6 and J7M fighters and has expressed an interest in purchasing 12 FC1 fighters. Today the Sudanese forces closely resemble the Chinese Liberation Army and is becoming a force to be reckoned with.

Regardless of the future structure of the country, China will still be able to obtain oil from the region as whoever is in power needs the revenue and will sell to anybody willing to pay the financial and political price. Furthermore oil resources are located throughout the country and not confined to any single region. Thus the issue of oil supply security, let alone a regional conflict for oil is not the central issue when looking at the overall stability of the region – it's all about water.

If the country is partitioned, the 1959 Agreement for the Full Utilisation of the Nile would be abrogated. This could result in Ethiopia increasing its use of Nile water for agricultural purposes as would a future partitioned Sudan increase its usage for the same reasons. An independent Darfur might be tempted to divert water by the construction of a canal or pipeline to its territory in order to alleviate its water stress. The country which would suffer most from this development would be Egypt which already today is taking more of its allocated share and due to its exploding population will need yet more water in the future. Already today Egypt is forced to import food as it cannot grow enough due to lack of water.

A direct result of the growing water stress in the region and Egypt's increasing demand for water is the reopening of the debate surrounding the Jonglei Canal. This canal would ensure that water flows to the Sudd, a vast wetland in Sothern Sudan, where the Nile river wanders for 400 miles losing anything up to 50 % of its water due to evaporation, would be bypassed. During the wet season the Sudd overflows into the surrounding areas of up to 80.000 squ. Km. This annual pattern of flooding is an integral part of the ecosystem of the area and considered crucial to local flora and fauna.

Construction of the canal was started in 1980, much at the insistence of the Egyptian government but halted in 1983 as a result of the civil war. To date 260 out of 360 km have been completed and all signs point towards a resumption of work. Undoubtedly the completion of this project would have great benefits to Egypt as the volume of water reaching both Sudan and Egypt would increase by an estimated 4 ckm p.a. due to the decrease in evaporation.

Furthermore it would open up a remote part of Sudan which is cut off from the rest of the country during floods and deserted during the dry season. It would also reduce journey time on the new canal and help develop the region by easing access to new potential oil fields.

Predictably, environmentalists are against the completion of the canal. They argue that such a development will drastically affect the microclimate of the region, reduce water quality and lead to the destruction of fish stocks. Sudanese politicians are divided on the issue. In the

South of the country the former rebels point to the fact that it was them who stopped the building in 1983 as it ignored the interests of the local population and that all benefits would accrue to the former colonial masters in Egypt and the government in Khartoum. Others see the benefits of such a project and would like to see the canal completed.

Currently relations between Sudan and Egypt are cordial, at least on the surface, and it is apparent that both countries are seeking ways to avert the crisis which is on the horizon. There are tensions between the two countries, many of these stem from the fact that up until 1956 Sudan was a colony of both Britain and Egypt and some in Khartoum still feel that they are being treated as if Sudan were still a colony. There is some truth in this – to this day relations between the two countries are not handled by the Egyptian foreign ministry but by the Presidents Office.

Egypt, the stronger of the two, is well aware that it is dependant upon Sudan in order to keep to the 1959 agreement which guarantees the free flow of water, thus there is currently a balance of power. If however the volume of water received and needed by Egypt is reduced, for whatever reason, then this has the potential for conflict in the not too distant future. It is also worth bearing in mind that the 1929 agreement stipulates that none of the Nile countries other than Egypt could build water works that might restrict the flow of the river. Cairo insists that the treaty is still valid and claims the right to use military force if it is violated.

Cairo has in the past threatened to use force if water flow were to be reduced and would clearly do so again. This makes the Jonglei Canal such an important issue for both Cairo and Khartoum. If the South were to decide against the completion, for whatever reason, this could easily result in Khartoum and Cairo in putting pressure on the South to complete the project.

If the 2011 referendum results in a split up of the country and the matter of the Jonglei canal has not been resolved by that time, then we are faced with a potential conflict which could result in the issue being resolved violently rather than by negotiations. In the event of a succession, the South has declared that it would insist on renegotiation of the 1959 agreement. Clearly, the completion of the Jonglei canal would play a major part in any such negotiations and it would be in the interest of stability if this issue could be amicably resolved prior to the referendum in 2011.

Severe water shortages could result in the overthrow of the current government in Cairo with a Moslem Brotherhood regime the most likely outcome. Such a change cannot be in the interest of the West. A new regime might be tempted to resort to force in order to secure the required volume of water as it would be under strong pressure from the population to do so. Conceivably it could use the 1929 agreement as a justification for intervention. This could result in a conflict which would suck in the countries in the Greater Horn of Africa, all of which are today prone to high levels of conflict.

Besides Sudan and Egypt, Ethiopia too has a word or two to say regarding the use of the waters of the Nile. The Blue Nile, which contributes most of the water in the river, rises at Lake Tana in the Ethiopian Highlands. Overall the Blue Nile contributes 73ckm of water yearly, little if any of which is utilised by Ethiopia which is one of the countries in the region suffering from severe water stress. Today only 1.7 % of the countries arable land is irrigated and only a fraction of the potential Hydroelectric potential is utilised. Ethiopia's population is growing rapidly and is estimated to grow from around 70 million today to 186 million by 2050. This will result in an increase in demand for foodstuffs and electric power which in turn will result in the construction of dams and other water works for irrigation and production of electric power.

It comes not as a surprise to observe that the Chinese too have realised this and a top level Chinese delegation led by the Chinese Construction Minister, Wang Guangtao met the Ethiopian Minister of Mines and Energy, Alemayetu Tegenu in February 2008. The Ethiopian Government is openly encouraging Chinese firms such as Sinhydro Corporation to expand their activities in Ethiopia in order to develop the rich hydroelectric resources of the country. Sinhydro is already involved in one such project at the Tekeze hydroelectric station in northern Ethiopia which is due to come on stream in August 2008. Ethiopia has an estimated hydropower potential of 45.000 MW, ample for its own demand with much to spare for exports.

In the past both Egypt and Sudan have accepted that Ethiopia has the right to benefit from the river which flows through their country and upon which they all depend. Hitherto the limited construction of dams in Ethiopia has had no effect on water flows, however large scale construction of dams and a rapid increase of water usage by Ethiopia resulting in diminishing supplies of water downstream is a different matter. Egypt maintains that a massive increase in river works upstream would affect not only quantity but also quality of the water and is expressing reservations. Clearly any future negotiations regarding the use of the Nile will have to include Ethiopia.

The potential for conflict around the use of the water of the Nile is significant and real. Sudan and Ethiopia are displaying signs of being fragile states, the governments not being able to control parts of its internal territory. Economic management in these countries is weak and major political groups are systematically excluded from political processes. There are also signs of inadequate transparency in the public management of natural resource extraction and high levels of corruption in the public and private sector. Egypt has kept a firm grip on dissidents within the country thanks to strong support from the United States. It has to be realised, however, that the Muslim Brotherhood would sweep the board in any truly free elections and that Egypt today is politically highly unstable. A potential US withdrawal from the region has to be seen in this context, the likelihood of rapid destabilisation in the event of such an occurrence is great.

The discovery of key commodities such as oil and water in unstable or fragile states are often linked to civil war and risk of conflict. Previous examples of resource-related secessionist violence include Aceh (Indonesia), Biafra (Nigeria), Cabinda (Angola), Katanga (Congo, DRC), and West Papua (Indonesia). One rightly refers to the “curse of resources” in such regions. In some resources-rich areas, war economies take root, with the aim no longer to secure state power, but to maintain and reproduce the profits of combatants and their supporters. Civil war endures because the sides are so evenly balanced that neither can prevail and it is in neither side’s economic interest to end the conflict.

Both Sudan and Egypt continue to discover new oil reserves, in the case of Sudan this is fuelling and prolonging its internal conflict and contributing to the potential fragmentation of the country. Both countries have modernised and expanded their Armed Forces, aided by America in the one instance, China on the other. The true bone of contention in the future lies however in the control of the waters of the Nile as both countries are so dependant upon this resource. A potential conflict can only be averted by renegotiating the agreements which go back to colonial days and such negotiations must be brokered by regional organisations such as the African Union or the members of IGAD.

The incidence of international conflict is likely to increase in the decade to come as international capacity for conflict prevention declines. At the same time, according to the

World Bank, the number of fragile states is rising. It comes as no surprise that the list of such countries is almost identical to those countries suffering from water stress. Water will not be a hindrance to peace if there is the political will to avoid conflict. That precludes that there is a working government in place with whom one can negotiate. If however countries want to fight then the waters of the Nile will give them ample opportunities.

*Remarks:*

*Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*



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