

International River Network (IRN): “*GERD Panel of Experts Report: Big Questions Remain, Monday, March 31, 2014*”

A Proxy Campaign against Ethiopia?

-A Response by GERD National Panel of Experts (NPoE)

For so many years now the IRN, International River Network, this self-appointed “guardian” of all rivers of the world, has been leaving no stone unturned in its effort to subvert Ethiopia’s efforts to develop its water resources and lift its vast and growing population out of poverty. This is manifested most glaringly in its incessant negative campaign against the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), initiated from the very first days when the idea of water resources development on the Abbay was floated, including even through the Nile Basin Initiative.

Apart from being amused, the NPOE so far had chosen to ignore IRN’s anti-Ethiopia lobbying which is driven by an ideological, if not fanatical-messianic mission to “protect [the world’s] rivers and ... to stop destructive dams”. IRN is accuser, police, judge and jury all rolled into one. IRN determines for countries, particularly for developing and poor countries like Ethiopia, how to do water resources development projects the “right” way. For these “backward” countries, IRN is the high priest that communes with God the Almighty and determines what is the most environmentally appropriate, most efficient and economical, and most beneficial for local, national and regional not only flora and fauna but also human communities too. What paternalism!!

Until now we did not find it worthwhile to get into polemics with what we thought were basically misinformed and misguided IRN activists. That is, until now. But now we are compelled to revise our stance toward these people. The straw that broke the camel’s back, so to speak, happened on March 31, 2014 when IRN posted on its website a piece entitled “**GERD panel of Experts Report: Big Questions Remain**” in which IRN explicitly called on Ethiopia to halt the construction of GERD!!

It would be unconscionable for us as professional Ethiopians well versed with and advising on GERD related issues to keep on looking at these people with bemusement and indifference when they peddle, clearly siding with Egypt, distorted, unsubstantiated and hostile mercenary propaganda against GERD and the Ethiopian people. It would take pages and pages to show the intense partisan nature of IRN in its entirety. However, the next few paragraphs suffice to illustrate our concern and to show a clear **pattern** of IRN’s growing hostility toward Ethiopia. IRN’s campaign against GERD and Ethiopia happened in four overlapping but discernable distinct stages:

Stage 1: Dissuade them!

True to its anti-dam creed, IRN did its best to discourage the idea of dam building in Ethiopia in the first place. IRN put forth whatever argument to dissuade decision makers. Arguments included those dams of a GERD scale would drain the national budget, would distort priorities, would be difficult to fund, etc. Here is one quote from their website:

“The US\$5 billion scheme [GERD] is out of scale for such a poor country; the current cost estimate equals the country’s entire annual budget. The costly project is monopolizing government funding for the energy sector, leaving many worthy projects that would directly address the nation’s high energy poverty underfunded.”

IRN, in a piece titled “A Tale of Two Dams: Comparing Ethiopia’s Grand Renaissance to Hoover” and “drawing lessons” from ‘follies’ of the Hoover Dam, offered advice to Ethiopia: do not repeat USA’s mistakes! We will not go into the contentious and invalid arguments, to say the least, put forward and better ignore IRN’s unsolicited advice. What is interesting is the poison that is wrapped in the package of IRN’s advice. Read on:

“Ethiopian engineers recently compared the Grand Renaissance Dam to Hoover as a project that can lift a struggling nation out of poverty, and a project whose accomplishments will go down in history. Yet the darker lessons from Hoover’s long history might be equally relevant for Ethiopia to review. Consider: The mega dam model is a dinosaur. Ethiopia would be better off leapfrogging over it to a more modern and efficient system, and find less provocative ways to assert its interests over the Nile waters” (emphasis added)

IRN’s message is not only that Ethiopia should not build big dams. The message is also that Ethiopia should stop being “provocative”. IRN advises Ethiopia to assert its right other than through being provocative i.e. other than through deciding to build GERD. To IRN, Ethiopia’s decision to build GERD is provocation!! So much, for IRN’s “advice”!

When the above tactics fail, IRN, referring to an expert (which it conveniently pluralizes), sheds crocodile tears by stating that Ethiopia is wasting its scarce resources on oversized projects like the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Here is another quote from their website:

“Ethiopia’s Biggest Dam Oversized, Experts Say Date: Thursday, September 5, 2013.

In May, Ethiopia diverted the Blue Nile to begin building its largest dam project to date, the 6,000 MW Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD) – a move that angered Egypt, which fears its water supply will shrink over the many years it will take to fill the huge reservoir. Besides the tensions this huge project is causing politically, there is growing concern that the dam will not produce nearly as much power as it has been designed to.” (Emphasis added)

Again, IRN never loses opportunity to lobby for its Egyptian paymasters. Not only does IRN talk about the “oversize” of GERD, but also about the Egyptians’ negative emotions over GERD: anger and fear!

In yet another alarmist piece related to GERD, IRN bemoaning “Ethiopia's Dam Boom”, fabricates outrageous white lies:

“International Rivers is monitoring dam planning in Ethiopia, working to keep international donors from investing in the worst projects on the drawing boards, and sharing knowledge about better alternatives and the legacy of Ethiopia's past dams with international civil society.

Water for irrigation from large reservoirs is mostly earmarked for large-scale agricultural producers – and increasingly, for foreign agricultural developments taking advantage of a government-sponsored land leasing program. (Emphasis added)

Alas, IRN has nothing factual to show, in any of the GERD plans, to substantiate its claim that GERD is an irrigation project!! We should not dwell on this any longer for the facts speak for themselves.

Stage 2: Smear campaign

When its dissuasion tactic failed and GERD implementation proceeded on with earnest, IRN had to embark on what we may term its Stage 2 tactics: a smear campaign. Here IRN does all it can to find any fault – big or small, real or imagined- with GERD in a bid to discredit it in the eyes of the world, particularly funders. Here is one quote from an IRN piece of 06/07/2013 with an eye catching alarmist title “Why has the Nile become a Battleground?:

“This week, Ethiopia announced it was diverting the flow of the Blue Nile to begin building the huge Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Within days, water-stressed Egypt – a downstream Nile Basin nation – called for Ethiopia to halt its work on the giant new dam. Why is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam causing such strife? In addition to Egypt’s fears that it will reduce its lifeline of Nile waters, the tensions have been fanned by the project’s “SAD” planning

- process:*
- *Secretive: Although it is Africa’s biggest dam project and will have lasting impacts on its longest river, it has been developed under a veil of secrecy.*
 - *Autocratic: The dam will impact Ethiopians and downstream neighbors, yet its planning process has been top-down and unilateral. The public and dam-affected people have not been given a meaningful opportunity to critique the project*
- or*
- process.*
- *Dismissive: Ethiopian government officials have flatly stated they will not make changes to the project, and have asserted that the project will not have impacts on downstream countries*

The dam poses a number of risks to these downstream neighbors; one reason for the growing tension is that these risks have not been properly analyzed. Egypt has virtually no other sources of water for its people, and is already making do with less water per person than the international average. By at least one estimate, the Grand Renaissance reservoir could evaporate 3bn cubic meters of water a year – three times Egypt’s annual rainfall, and enough to meet the basic needs of up to half a million people. The reservoir could take 3-5 years to fill, reducing Egypt’s water supply by up to 25%.

However, damming off a shared river in a secretive and unilateral fashion is a provocative approach to resolving conflict in a water-stressed basin such as the Nile. Says Mohamed Allam, former minister of irrigation and water resources in Egypt: “This is not just about Egypt and Sudan. International rivers are governed by laws and conventions, in accordance with which any action that affects water quotas requires advanced notice and guarantees against possible harm.”

The Nile situation is not an isolated incident. Ethiopia is being similarly aggressive over the development of the shared Omo River, where it is building the controversial Gibe III Dam and developing large-scale plantations. These developments threaten Kenya’s Lake Turkana”. (Emphasis added)

IRN, the all-knowing God of water resources development, is angry that Ethiopia did not observe its commandment of good water resources planning.

Oh, GERD planning is too “secretive” concludes IRN. As if Egypt shared hers with us! IRN can dream all it wants. But we deal in and with the real world.

GERD planning is autocratic says IRN – it was not discussed with its neighbors!

GERD planning is dismissive judges IRN – since Ethiopia will not change the parameters of the project!

Oh GERD is wasteful condemns IRN - It will evaporate 3 BMC of water annually, equivalent to a non-existent Egyptian rainfall! IRN is making this fabricated statement, while keeping mum on the 10-15 BMC annual evaporation loss the Egyptian High Aswan Dam is causing in the middle of the Sahara Desert! How “fair” of IRN!!

Oh yes, GERD is provocative, says IRN, referring to Mohamed Allam, of all people, a former Egyptian Minister hostile to Ethiopia and eternal defender of the self claimed Egyptian quota.

Oh yes, GERD is harmful bemoans IRN, because it is going to affect Egypt, which has no other source of water, which is making do with less water per person.

Oh, dear IRN folks, need we tell you that of all African Countries, surely of all Nile Basin countries, it is only Egypt that has over 98% of its population with access to

potable water, while an Ethiopian girl of sixteen has to go on average 6 kilometers each day back and forth to fetch a gallon of water from a river or a dug hole!! How “fair” of IRN! IRN, as usual, never missed this opportunity to work on and provoke friendly and neighboring Kenya! As far back as March 2004, IRN, in a cynical piece on the Nile Basin Initiative titled “Can the Nile States Dam Their Way to Cooperation?” in the part which discussed the Tekeze Dam had “warned”:

“Ethiopia has reportedly neglected to formally consult with downstream Sudan and Egypt on the scheme, a decision which could further strain relations between the countries”

Oh IRN folks. What do you say to the appreciation Sudan is heaping on Ethiopia for the positive impact of that dam!!

Stage 3: Create Alarm!

IRN, noticing that its dissuasion and smear campaigns did not achieve its goals of stopping GERD at its inception or planning stages, embarked desperately to create alarm among the international community and downstream countries the fervor of which the Egyptians might envy.

IRN first attempted spinning or otherwise amplifying a conspiracy theory about GERD thus:

“The project’s launch came in the midst of the Egyptian revolution, which some observers believe was intended to take advantage of the more powerful nation’s confused political state at a time when the issue of who controls the Nile is heating up.”

IRN also “psychologized” Ethiopia’s decision to build the GERD thus:

“Egypt has long held the majority rights to the Nile – a situation that especially angers Ethiopia, which is the source of 85% of the river’s waters.”

Be that as it may, the worst is that IRN seems to wish any conflict, violent or otherwise, between Egypt and Ethiopia is better than seeing the GERD completed. Here is another one:

“While there are no known studies about the dam’s impacts on the river’s flow, filling such a huge reservoir (it will hold up to 67 billion cubic meters of water, and could take up to seven years to reach capacity) will certainly impact Egypt, which relies almost totally on the Nile for its water supply. Development Today magazine reports that the Nile flow into Egypt could be cut by 25% during the filling period. Many fear the project could set off a water war in the region, and indeed, in mid-2013, tensions flared dramatically. Climate change could increase the project’s many risks. The potential for conflict is probably the main reason international funders have shown no interest in supporting the project.”

Again IRN’s concern is Egypt’s water security, not Ethiopia’s poverty, water, energy and food insecurity! And then the allusion to conflict, referring to “Many” (whoever they are!) who fear the almost inevitable conflict and war that would follow if Ethiopia proceeds with GERD. Oh, international financiers beware! Do not put your

money there. What shameless partisanship of IRN. Should we be accused if we suspect payment under the table?

Stage 4: Conduct a Stop Them Campaign!

IRN, realizing its preceding three maneuvers did not yield any meaningful result, had to come to the open, reveal itself and launch its outright and blatant campaign against the GERD.

In a June 2013 piece titled **“Why has the Nile River Become a Battleground?”** the IRN speculated:

“But what if Ethiopia refuses to engage? Some believe the International Court of Justice should be called in. – a move that Ethiopia rejects. Others hope Ethiopia’s major donors will use their diplomatic leverage to intervene. . . .” The article further urged that *“Western donors have thus far mostly stayed out of the debate on Ethiopia’s dam building. Yet Ethiopia is one of the world’s largest recipients of foreign aid. The US has been the largest donor to the country, through a range of programs. Ethiopia has been receiving \$3.5 billion on average from international donors in recent years – a critical portion of its national budget. This assistance explains how such a poor nation can afford to build costly dams and irrigation infrastructure without dedicated funding. Western donors such as the United States have a responsibility to step up diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia ...”*

IRN’s maneuverings and multifaceted campaigns notwithstanding, the GERD progress has continued unabated, almost a third complete, thanks to the whole hearted and unequivocal support for and rally of the Ethiopian people behind their project! IRN seems to have gotten desperate. There is nothing more telling of this than its latest piece, dated March 31, 2014, apparently based on a “leaked” IPOE report, full of lies and distortions, entitled **“GERD Panel of Experts Report: Big Questions Remain.”** Here is an extensive quote from that piece:

“The mega dam is being built on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, near the Sudan border, and has created conflict with Egypt over its downstream impacts; the experts’ study confirms Egypt’s concerns that the project’s impacts could be significant and are not well understood. Egypt has called for mediation if further studies are not allowed; at this writing, Ethiopia had refused, and was continuing with dam construction.

*.... It is also clear that there is precious little oversight on Africa’s largest dam project to date. While the international panel has brought a type of oversight, it may be too little, too late – and with too little teeth; it seems the panel does not have a continuing role in ensuring best practices as construction proceeds. The panel’s report is almost a year old at this writing, yet its members have been mostly silent since their report was completed (as far as we know, none of the panelists have made public statements about the project). The Egyptian and Ethiopian governments continue the war of words, while at the same time construction on the mega dam proceeds, and questions raised by the panel remain unanswered. Going forward, **International Rivers recommends***

construction on the project be halted until all necessary studies recommended by the panel are completed, and a process is in place for ensuring public accountability on the project. Given the panel's findings, Egypt's call for mediation in the process is reasonable, and donor governments and international bodies should support such a process (emphasis added)

In the first place the IPoE did not have an “oversight” role as erroneously stated by IRN. The IPoE’s role as defined by the three Ministers of water affairs of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan is “ *mainly facilitative, focused on promoting dialogue and understanding around GERD related issues of interest to the three countries so as to build trust and confidence among all parties.*”

We appreciate the response to the biased IRN article posted on hornaffairs.com by Mr Danieil Berhane entitled, “ *Anti-dam group doctors report, joins Egypt to stop Ethiopia’s dam*” (April 6, 2014 hornaffairs.com). We invite readers to read this article for a line by line rebuttal to the IRN unsubstantiated and distorted writing entitled, “*GERD Panel of Experts Report: Big Questions Remain, Monday, March 31, 2014*”

We would however like to pose our own BIG QUESTIONS to IRN:

Where in the IPoE report do the IRN experts find recommendation of the IPoE that states to stop or delay the GERD until the recommended additional studies are conducted??!

Where in the report do the IRN experts find a statement that states “the experts' study confirms Egypt’s concerns that the project’s impacts could be significant and are not well understood.” ??!

What is peculiar with the panel’s recommendation to conduct “a full transboundary environmental and social impact assessment ... conducted jointly by the three countries.”, since the Transboundary Environmental and Socioeconomic Impact study conducted through the initiative of Ethiopia and based on desk study requires more data and information from the downstream countries??!

The desk study has clearly shown that all expected downstream impacts can be mitigated and thus the more detailed recommended studies will not change the major findings of the desk study. Other studies done by the Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office of the NBI have also confirmed that changes in hydrological conditions due to GERD are all manageable. Thus these additional studies do not necessitate the delay or stopping of the construction of the GERDP .

Instead of sowing seeds of mistrust with your unsubstantiated writings among the people of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, we offer our humble advice to appreciate the most obvious benefits of the GERDP for the downstream countries that may assist you to be rational and refrain from propagating irresponsible and biased information.

1. The energy generation from the GERD will enhance regional and economic integration such as through power interconnectedness, regional cooperation, trust and confidence building
2. Due to regulated and increased flows a longer period of navigation on the Nile River downstream High Aswan Dam (HAD) will be possible. This will have important benefits for the tourism sector by extending the present touristic period
3. The HAD reservoir capacity loss due to sedimentation will be reduced since the GERD Reservoir will store substantial quantity of sediments.
4. With GERD operating upstream, average annual HAD losses will be 9.5 BCM/year instead of 10.8 BCM/year in case of HAD alone. Losses by evaporation, decrease by 12% comparing to HAD alone situations
5. With GERD there will be increased flood control and due to its routing capacity there will be better flood control downstream of HAD and Risk of HAD overtopping will be eliminated.
6. With GERD, the total storage capacity along the Nile River will significantly increase in the long term. This will reduce the risk due to hydrological variability with sequences of dry and wet years.
7. The GERD will regulate the flows of the Blue Nile and this will support flows arriving at HAD.
8. The GERD will reduce negative impacts on population and infrastructures in Sudan caused by recurrent floods.
9. The GERD will capture sediment, protecting irrigation canals and equipment from damages caused by sedimentation both in Sudan and Egypt.
10. The GERD will improve Sudanese dams efficiency and water use optimization and energy generation will be increased by more than 2,657 GWh/year due to the GERD regulation of flow.

Conclusion

It is obvious that in its desperation the IRN has been forced to come out and show its true color: a proxy for Egypt masquerading as an international environmental group fighting for the health of rivers!!

In all its ranting does IRN feel obliged, even if to feign decency, neutrality and disinterest, to mention Ethiopia's need and desperation. By the way, is not Sudan a downstream country? Why does IRN shut up about Sudan's identification with and support for GERD?!!!!!!!!!!

Why does IRN dwell and fight exclusively for Egyptian interests, harps on their real or imagined and fabricated fears, while not uttering a single word about the waste incurred via the High Aswan Dam (HAD), via the Toshka project, etc?

By contrast, IRN never feels obliged to mention a single merit of GERD. It is a taboo!

IRN has no boundaries of shame. It accuses the IPOE members of 'keeping silent'! Should every sensible human being on the face of the earth turn into a corrupt IRN partisan activist?

The IRN! The IRN that resides in California, USA, whose activists never have endured or experienced what it means to go thirsty or hungry for days; the IRN, if it had all the power to do so would have halted all water resources development projects all over the developing world.

Or, is it only in Ethiopia?

Consider this: Prior to 1950 large scale dams worldwide did not number more than 5000. By 2000 large scale dams were more than 40,000. As of 2006, they stood at over 50,000. IRN's campaigns notwithstanding, big dams are there to grow, especially in the developing world. So, given these trends what is IRN talking about, except to single out a single country, Ethiopia, and treat it as pariah and discourage its progress? Ethiopia never forgets the pains it had to bear due to its geography. Ethiopia has endured centuries of invasions and subversions by powers from far and close that aspired to control the headwaters of the Nile. Ethiopia has been prevented physically from accessing its water resources by keeping it busy with wars, direct or proxy wars. IRN's anti Ethiopia campaign is but a continuation of that history - by another means, that is.

Be that as it may, we condemn IRN's unfair and biased support for Egypt in its disagreements with Ethiopia contrary to its own mission statement. We categorically reject IRN's advice to Ethiopia to accept its proposal and halt construction of GERD. What more do we need to prove our contention that IRN is doing ethically dubious job and propagating proxy campaigns against Ethiopia on behalf of Egypt.

We would like IRN, all friends and foes to know that the Ethiopian people are determined to develop their water resources and the construction of GERDP will not stop or delayed for a second.
