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Ethiopia – conflicts in three frontlines

Abstract: *Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic nation with a population of 110 million. For more than two decades Ethiopia has been considered one of the most stable countries on the African continent, with an impressive rate of economic development and a leading political status on the African continent and beyond. Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy signed a peace treaty with Eritrea and won the Nobel Peace Prize. Since 2020, however, there has been a rapid deterioration in the security and political situation of the country and Ethiopia is currently facing one of the most severe crises it has known in the modern era. Prime Minister Abiy has been embroiled in a confrontation with the opposition from Tigray province that has led to a bloody civil war, talks on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam with Egypt and Sudan have reached a dead end, and there has been a deterioration in the border conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan. There are concerns that the rapidly escalating civil war could trigger wider violence in Ethiopia that could even lead to it breaking up. Landlocked Ethiopia borders six countries. Troops from Eritrea are already fighting in Ethiopia and a prolonged internal crisis could suck in other neighbors and destabilize the volatile Horn of Africa region.*

Keywords: *Tigray, T.P.L.F, Abiy Ahmad, Addis Ababa, Sudan, Al Fashqa, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Blue Nile.*

Introduction

Ethiopia is the second-most populous country on the African continent with 110 million inhabitants and a complex and conflicting multi-ethnic society. Over the past few decades, Ethiopia has enjoyed internal stability in one of the least stable regions on the African continent. During this period Ethiopia enjoyed economic prosperity and leading political status in the African continent and beyond. The stability of the country was achieved through a federal system of government and a rigid domestic policy that suppressed any revelation of opposition to the rule of Prime Minister Meles Zinawi from the Tigray minority. During Meles Zenawi's rule, the main external point of contention was with Eritrea, with which Ethiopia waged a bloody armed conflict, but for most of the period, a ceasefire was maintained between the two countries. Another source of controversy was the building of the Renaissance dam by Ethiopia and Egypt and Sudan's fear of harming the supply of Nile water. Ethiopia began negotiations with Egypt and Sudan which did not lead to an agreement until Zenawi's death and the disputes remained open. Another dispute was with Sudan over the demarcation of the border between the countries in the Al – Fashqa region. In 2007, Prime Minister Zenawi reached an agreement with Sudanese President Omar Al Bashir that maintains the status quo in the disputed area and postpones the permanent solution of the border dispute. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who replaced Mr. Zenawi as prime minister had to address these hotspots of controversy. The beginning of Mr. Abiy's tenure looked promising. He managed to end the conflict with Eritrea and won the Nobel Peace Prize for it. But he failed to reach an agreement with Egypt and Sudan on the Renaissance Dam, and his decision to continue filling the dam without an agreement led to increased tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt and Sudan. Political reforms promoted by Prime Minister Abiy met with fierce opposition from the Tigrayan leadership who saw in his steps an attempt to oust them from the political power they held for about two decades and this led to the Tigray uprising against the federal government and bloody civil war. Sudan took advantage of the weakness of the Ethiopian regime and forcibly took control of the disputed border area between the two countries. The article will present the 3 arenas of conflict that Ethiopia has to deal with today and will suggest ways to prevent further escalation of the internal conflict in Ethiopia and the deterioration of the crises into a regional violent conflict.

The civil war in Ethiopia

The conflict between the government of Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (T.P.L.F) forces in its Tigray region has thrown the country into turmoil and fighting has been going on since November 2020, destabilizing the country and leaving thousands of people dead.¹

The crisis that led to the civil war ²

Ethiopia is the second-largest populated country in Africa after Nigeria, with a population of roughly 110 million. Ethiopia has over 90 ethnic groups and 80 languages.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a four-party coalition, led primarily by the Tigray ethnic group, had successfully overthrown the Marxist-Leninist military junta of Mengistu Haile Marriam in 1991.

Although the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups together constitute 60 percent of the total Ethiopian population and the Tigray people account for merely six to seven percent of the population It was a Tigray leader, Mr. Melles Zenawi, the leader of the T.P.L.F and the EPRDF that governed Ethiopia from 1991 to 2018. Since 1994, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi adopted the system of ethnic federalism that organized Ethiopia into 10 ethnolinguistic states. The coalition gave autonomy to Ethiopia's regions but retained a tight grip on the central government. Under the coalition, Ethiopia became more prosperous and stable, but concerns were routinely raised about human rights and the level of democracy. The roots of the current crisis can be traced to Ethiopia's system of government. At the root of the current conflict is a disagreement between Prime Minister Abiy and the T.P.L.F which for almost 27 years dominated the whole country, not just Tigray. The Oromos - Ethiopia's largest group - long felt marginalized. Mr. Abiy Ahmed, himself an Oromo and part of the ruling coalition, was seen as the man who could resolve the problem. Mr. Abiy came to power in 2018 on the back of a wave of protests by members of the Oromo ethnic group. Mr. Abiy liberalized politics, set up a new party (the Prosperity Party), removed key Tigrayan government leaders accused of corruption and repression, and dissolved the EPRDF coalition in 2019. Tigray's leaders saw Mr.

¹ Ethiopia's Tigray war: The short, medium and long story Published, BBC News, June 9, 2021.

² Ethiopia's Tigray war: The short, medium and long story Published, BBC News, June 9, 2021.

Abiy's reforms as an attempt to centralize power and destroy Ethiopia's federal system and the T.P.L.F refused to join his Prosperity Party.³

Tigray argued that the central government had not been tested in a national election since Mr. Abiy's appointment as prime minister and polls have since just been held in some parts of the country. Tigray's decision to hold its election in September 2020, was an unprecedented act of defiance against the central government, and both sides then designated each other as "illegitimate". The rift grew when the central government suspended funding for Tigray and cut ties with it in October 2020. At the time, Tigray's administration said this amounted to a "declaration of war".

The civil war (2020 – 2021)

The conflict escalated into the war on November 4, 2020, when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered a military offensive against regional forces in Tigray after the T.P.L.F fighters captured federal military bases and sized huge stockpile of weapons. High-ranking officers and soldiers who resisted were killed or captured by the T.P.L.F fighters. Prime minister Abiy said Tigray had crossed a "red line" and the federal government was therefore forced into a military confrontation. The T.P.L.F has said it struck preemptively because federal forces had landed in a neighboring region days earlier in preparation for an assault. Ethiopian federal forces responded quickly and seized control of Tigray's regional capital, Mekelle, and other towns. The government restricted internet and phone communications and declared a six-month state of emergency in Tigray. Tigrayans made up about 18% of the whole army and about twice that in the officer corps. Their numbers were disproportionate compared to the size of the population. The Ethiopian military, which was dominated by Tigrayan officers, was divided, and fighting erupted between rival units inside the region.⁴ The T.P.L.F. and its armed supporters fled to rural and mountainous areas in the north of Ethiopia and bled the Ethiopian federal army through guerrilla warfare in Tigray by carrying out hit-and-run attacks. But after a year of

³ Ethiopia's Tigray conflict: Why the rest of the world is worried, BBC News, November 15, 2021.

⁴ [Declan Walsh](#) and [Abdi Latif Dahir](#), why Is Ethiopia at war with itself? The New York Times, November 26, 2021.

conflict, the tide of the civil war in Ethiopia has shifted in favor of the Tigray rebel forces. After capturing the whole of Tigray in June 2021 the T.P.L.F launched an offensive in Amhara and Afar regions. The T.P.L.F had claimed to have captured Dessie and the town of Kombolcha from the Amhara region and began its march towards Ethiopia's capital and its forces came close to roughly 200 kilometers from Addis Ababa.

The rebels were also pushing east, hoping to seize the road that connects to the port in neighboring Djibouti, which would give them control of a key supply route.⁵

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has responded by, declaring a state of emergency and appealing to citizens to take up arms to block the T.P.L.F fighters' advance.⁶

In late November 2021, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed went to the battlefield to lead military operations himself and under his command the Ethiopian federal forces launched a counteroffensive in December 2021 and recaptured many towns, pushing Tigrayan forces back more than 180 km.

The Ethiopian government has bolstered its forces by deploying militia fighters from Amhara, who swept into western Tigray. Then troops from Eritrea, Ethiopia's former enemy, flooded across the border into Tigray from the north to fight alongside Mr. Abiy's forces.

The government has announced its forces had recaptured the strategic towns of Dessie and Kombolcha and several small towns including Shewa Robit, a town some 220km from the capital Addis Ababa and the town Chifra in Afar region.⁷

Government sources said that pro-government forces were advancing towards the city of Waldia – a stronghold of the T.P.L.F that forces aligned with the T.P.L.F had taken control of the town in early August 2021.⁸ In November 2021, Turkey sold to Ethiopia military drones. Ethiopia has also purchased Chinese and Iranian drones and weapons.⁹ The Ethiopian government's superior air power including armed drones played a decisive role in the war and have turned the tide against the T.P.L.F.

⁵ [Declan Walsh](#) and [Abdi Latif Dahir](#), why Is Ethiopia at war with itself? The New York Times, November 26, 2021.

⁶ [Declan Walsh](#) and [Abdi Latif Dahir](#), why Is Ethiopia at war with itself? The New York Times, November 26, 2021.

⁷ Tigray rebels retake Ethiopian Heritage town Lalibela: Residents, Al Jazeera, December 12, 2021.

⁸ Tigray rebels retake Ethiopian Heritage town Lalibela: Residents, Al Jazeera, December 12, 2021.

⁹ Ethiopia's Tigray conflict: Why the rest of the world is worried, BBC News, November 15, 2021.

Tigray rebels responded with the recapture of the north Ethiopian town of Lalibela on December 12, 2021, less than two weeks after government forces and their allies took control of the town. The T.P.L.F rebel group's military leadership said in a statement shared with pro-T.P.L. F media they had launched "widespread counter-offensives" in numerous locations including along the road linking Gashena and Lalibela. Lalibela is UNESCO World Heritage town, home to 11 medieval rock-cut churches and a site of pilgrimage for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.¹⁰ But the T.P.L.F fighters withdrew to their stronghold in Tigray at the end of December 2021 in the face of the military offensive that saw government forces retake a string of strategic towns. T.P.L.F fighters were carrying out "phase-by-phase withdrawals" from various towns, including Lalibela, which has changed hands several times during the conflict.

The move marks a major reversal by the rebels, who previously dismissed the government's insistence on their withdrawal from Afar and Amhara for talks to begin as "an absolute non-starter".¹¹ In response to T.P.L.F rebel group's decision to withdraw its forces to Tigray, Ethiopia's government said that its troops would not advance further into the region of Tigray but warned that the decision could be overturned if "territorial sovereignty" was threatened.¹²

The Ethiopian government also announced on January 7, 2022, it would pardon and release several detained political figures, including members of the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (T.P.L.F), in a bid to promote national dialogue and unity. "Its purpose is to pave the way for a lasting solution to Ethiopia's problems in a peaceful, non-violent way," the government communications service said in a statement. The announcement came after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed issued a statement calling for "national reconciliation" as Ethiopia celebrated Orthodox Christmas.¹³

The announcement came a day after the United States said its special envoy for the Horn of Africa met with Ethiopia's prime minister to press for a negotiated end to the war. On January 10, 2022, a telephone conversation took place between US President Joe Biden and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. A senior US official speaking to reporters after the phone call said that as for hopes of reaching a peaceful solution to the conflict, there were encouraging signs recently, including the release of political prisoners. "We do see this as a moment of opportunity

¹⁰ Tigray rebels retake Ethiopian Heritage town Lalibela: Residents, Al Jazeera, December 12, 2021.

¹¹ TPLF rebels announce retreat towards Ethiopia's Tigray, Ahram online, December 20, 2021.

¹² Ethiopia govt says no further advance into Tigray, Ahram online, December 24, 2021.

¹³ Ethiopia pardons several detained TPLF, opposition figures, Al Arabiya, January 7, 2022.

if the parties are willing and able to seize it. That remains to be seen and this window won't be open forever." But the official spoke with cautious optimism, "Given what we've seen in the past, it's hard to know how long this relatively constructive phase will last," he said.¹⁴

The temporary halt of fighting, the T.P.L.F pullout from the Amhara and Afar regions, and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's call for "national reconciliation" had raised hopes there would be talks to end the war that has killed thousands and left parts of the country on the brink of famine.

The border conflict between Ethiopia and Sudan

Sudan and Ethiopia share a 1,600kilometer-long border. In 1902 a deal to draw up the frontier was struck between Great Britain, the colonial power in Sudan at the time, and Ethiopia but the agreement lacked clear demarcation lines.¹⁵ Ethiopia is witnessing a border conflict that could flare up into a war with neighboring Sudan. Ethiopia claimed that Sudan had invaded in early November 2020, attacked and displaced Ethiopians, and took control of vacated military camps in Al-Fashqa region.

Sudan invaded in Al-Fashqa in November 2020, around the time Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray. The bloody conflict in Tigray killed thousands and tens of thousands of Tigrayans have fled into Sudan.¹⁶ Al-Fashqa region is an area of 260 sq km of fertile land settled by Ethiopian farmers that Sudan says lies on its side of a border demarcated at the start of the 20th century, which Ethiopia rejects. The region is close to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the subject of another dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan, and Egypt.

In 2007, President Omar al-Bashir and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi – then the long-time rulers of Sudan and Ethiopia – agreed on a cooperation formula by which Ethiopian and Sudanese citizens could both cultivate the land, with the two sides agreeing to undertake formal demarcation at an unspecified later date. Leadership changes and political turbulence in both

¹⁴ US voices cautious optimism on ceasefire after Biden's call with Ethiopia PM, Al Arabiya, January 10, 2022.

¹⁵ Sudan-Ethiopia border demarcation talks set for Tuesday, Ahram online, December 20, 2020.

¹⁶ Sudan says 'repelled' Ethiopian forces in border area, Arab news, September 27, 2021.

countries have sharpened old rivalries between the two neighbors and brought the al-Fashqa dispute back to the fore.¹⁷

Clashes erupted between Sudanese and Ethiopian forces in December 2020 over Al-Fashqa region. Sudan's military said on December 17, 2020, a number of its officers had been ambushed by "Ethiopian forces and militias" during a security patrol of the Abu Tyour area of the country's Al-Qadarif province, along the border with Ethiopia. The statement added the cross-border attack caused casualties in lives and equipment without providing more details.¹⁸ In an effort to prevent further escalation in relations between the two countries Sudan's prime minister met his Ethiopian counterpart in December 2020. Hamdok's office said the meeting with Abiy Ahmed took place in Djibouti, on the sidelines of a summit of a regional bloc. The two leaders' meeting came just days after the cross-border attack by Ethiopian forces and militias in the Abu Tyour area.¹⁹ Sudan's state-run news agency reported that the military had deployed "large reinforcements" into Al-Qadarif province to reclaim territories controlled by Ethiopian farmers and militias in Sudan's Al-Fashqa border area.²⁰

In a statement on February 18, 2021, Ethiopia's foreign ministry said it believes "the conflict being trumpeted by the Sudanese government's military wing could only serve the interests of a third party at the expense of the Sudanese people."²¹

Sudan's foreign ministry responded on February 20, 2021, by saying "slander towards Sudan and accusation of being an agent for other parties is a grave and unforgivable insult. What the Ethiopian foreign ministry cannot deny is the third party whose troops entered with Ethiopian troops trespassing on Sudanese land."²²

During the recent border escalation between Ethiopia and Sudan, Cairo stressed its support for Khartoum's right to expel Ethiopian forces from Sudan's al-Fashqa region. Egypt also provided Sudan's military with dredging and engineering equipment.²³

The Al-Fashqa region is also close to the border with Eritrea and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki sent a message to the Sudanese Prime Minister, affirming that his country is not

¹⁷ Containing the Volatile Sudan-Ethiopia Border Dispute, reliefweb, June 24, 2021.

¹⁸ Egypt expresses its condolences to Sudan over victims of cross-border attack, Ahram online, December 17, 2020.

¹⁹ Sudan's PM meets Ethiopian leader after cross-border attack, Arab news, December 21, 2020.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sudan, Ethiopia Trade Accusations in Escalating Border Conflict, Asharq Al Awsat, February 20, 2021.

²² Sudan, Ethiopia Trade Accusations in Escalating Border Conflict, Asharq Al Awsat, February 20, 2021.

²³ [Mohammed Soliman](#), Egypt's Nile strategy, Middle East Institute, June 28, 2021.

involved in the ongoing border conflict between Sudan and Ethiopia. He voiced concern over the border dispute, stressing that his country supports Sudan's right to extend its sovereignty over its lands. Afewerki said that his country calls for a peaceful solution between the two sides in a way that serves peace, stability, and security in the region.²⁴

Sudan has been stationing troops in Al-Fashqa region since the end of last year, and the UN stated earlier this year that Eritrean troops, Ethiopian troops, and ethnic Amhara militia were also operating in the disputed region.²⁵

The border clashes between Sudan and Ethiopia (2021)

On November 28, 2021, several Sudanese soldiers were killed in an attack by Ethiopian forces in Al-Fashqa near the border between the countries.

Sudan Tribune cited military sources as saying that the fighting on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia resulted in the death of 21 soldiers and injured at least 30 others. The fighting lasted eight hours and heavy artillery and machine guns were used the Sudanese army added that it inflicted "heavy losses in lives and equipment" on the Ethiopian forces.²⁶

On September 26, 2021, Sudan's military said, it had "repelled the incursion of Ethiopian forces" in the disputed border area of Al-Fashqa.²⁷ Ethiopia denied the accusations "We deny the movement of our forces on the Sudanese border or their incursion into any area."²⁸

On September 3, 2021, the Ethiopian army claimed, that it killed "50 terrorists" and wounded others as they tried to infiltrate through the Sudanese border to the area where the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is being built.²⁹

Colonel Seif Ingi, the operations coordinator in the Metekel Zone in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, claimed that the attackers carried light and heavy weapons as well as mines during their infiltration and the Ethiopian army seized some of their weapons and destroyed others. A large part of the armed elements fled "back to the north" after their defeat.

²⁴ Eritrea Denies Involvement in Border Conflict Between Sudan, Ethiopia, Asharq Al Awsat, February 25, 2021.

²⁵ Sudan: Ethiopian troops 'repelled' after al-Fashaga advance, BBC News, September 27, 2021.

²⁶ Sudanese soldiers killed in attack by Ethiopian forces: Sudan military, Al Arabiya, November 28, 2021.

²⁷ Sudan says 'repelled' Ethiopian forces in border area, Arab news, September 27, 2021.

²⁸ Sudan: Ethiopian troops 'repelled' after al-Fashaga advance, BBC News, September 27, 2021.

²⁹ Amr Kandil, Ethiopian army claims 'thwarting armed attempt to disrupt construction of GERD', Ahram online, September 3, 2021.

Colonel Seif Ingi claimed that the attackers were elements aligned with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (T.P.L.F) and explained that the T.P.L.F attempted to attack GERD construction because they mistakenly assumed that the majority of the Ethiopian army troops had moved to the north.³⁰

Colonel Seif Ingi, said that "attackers have joined our 'historic enemies' in an attempt to stall the construction of the dam but they have failed", but he didn't say who are the 'historic enemies.' The Sudanese Foreign Ministry on September 4, 2021, condemned the "misleading statements" by the Ethiopian army claiming that armed groups had entered the country through the Sudanese border to target an Ethiopian facility. Such baseless statements have a clear purpose for political consumption, the ministry said in a statement and Sudan is fully committed to the principles of good neighborliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.³¹

The controversy over Ethiopia's Blue Nile dam (GERD)

On July 19, 2021, Ethiopia announced that it had completed the second filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This unilateral step had been rejected by the downstream countries, Egypt and Sudan, which insisted on a binding agreement with Ethiopia before it completed the filling of the dam.³² In light of the failure of the negotiations, Egypt and Sudan have called on the UN Security Council to take action to prevent Ethiopia from unilaterally filling the dam without a binding agreement with the downstream countries. On July 8, 2021, the Security Council held an emergency meeting to discuss the issue of GERD. Egypt and Sudan attempted to push members to adopt a Tunisian resolution that would force Ethiopia to stop the second filling of the dam but their attempt failed. The Security Council did not put forth a decision or statement to endorse their demand, rather, it referred the matter to the African Union. A few days later, Ethiopia announced that it completed the second filling of the dam.³³ The controversial dam has strained Ethiopia's relations with Egypt and Sudan and the Ethiopian move added fuel to the stalled negotiations between the three countries.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Sudan condemns Ethiopian army's 'misleading statements', Ahran online, September 4, 2021.

³² Ibrahim Haithar, Sudan and Egypt begin joint air exercises, BBC Monitoring, November 16, 2020.

³³ [Khalil Al-Anani](#), Will Egypt Live with GERD as a Bitter Reality? Arab center Washington DC, August 19, 2021.

Sudan's Foreign Minister Mariam Alsadig Almahdi voiced outrage following Ethiopia's announcement of its decision to initiate the second filing of GERD. She considered it "a clear violation of international law and the Declaration of Principles, and an imminent danger and threat to Sudan."³⁴

In light of the failure of the negotiations, Egypt and Sudan have urged the international community to intervene to try to find a solution to the GERD crisis before it escalates and leads to further regional instability.

The differences between Ethiopia and Egypt and Sudan regarding GERD revolve around three main issues:

The first is reaching a legally binding agreement among the parties overfilling and operating the dam, one that would allow them to work collectively. Egypt and Sudan call for a legally binding agreement on the dam's filling and operation, while Ethiopia insists on guidelines as it considers that any binding accord means interfering in a sovereign matter.³⁵

The second issue is the discord over the legal reference that can be invoked in the event of a dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt and Sudan and how the three countries would settle any future disputes. The Declaration of Principles did not provide a specific mechanism for resolving future disputes. While Ethiopia insists on the African Union as a mediator in negotiations, Egypt and Sudan want to include others such as the European Union, the United Nations, and the United States—which Ethiopia rejects.³⁶

The third is the dispute over the filling and operation of the dam during drought years and how much water Ethiopia will release downstream if a multi-year drought occurs. It is a critical point for Egypt because it suffers from great water scarcity. Failure to agree on the passage of a certain percentage of water may lead to catastrophic results for Egypt.³⁷

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ The dispute centers on how much water Ethiopia will release downstream if a multi-year drought occurs and how the three countries would settle any future disputes. Egypt and Sudan also call for a legally binding agreement on the dam's filling and operation, while Ethiopia insists on guidelines.

³⁶ [Khalil Al-Anani](#), Will Egypt Live with GERD as a Bitter Reality? Arab center Washington DC, August 19, 2021.

³⁷ Ibid.

Background

The construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) has been a source of tension between Ethiopia and Sudan and Egypt for some years. The dam, begun in 2011, will hold a massive 74 billion cubic meters of water and will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa. Addis Ababa wants to raise power generation to 17,346 MW from a current capacity of just over 4,300 MW from hydropower, wind, and geothermal sources and aims to become the continent's biggest power exporter.³⁸ Ethiopia claims the dam is vital for its development and will reach full power-generating capacity in 2023, helping pull millions of its people out of poverty.³⁹

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is located in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region of Ethiopia, only 40 km east of the country's border with Sudan.

About 77% of Sudan's water sources come from the Rivers Nile, Gash, Parka, and Azoum, all of which are outside its borders.⁴⁰ The Blue Nile, the river's main tributary, accounts for 80 percent of the river's volume and originates in Ethiopia's highlands. The Blue Nile meets with the White Nile in central Sudan from where the Nile winds northward through Egypt and flows into the Mediterranean Sea.

Egypt relies heavily on the Nile River as its main source of water. The River Nile is the backbone of Egypt's industrial and agricultural sector and is the primary source of drinking water for the population. Egypt has been suffering from severe water scarcity in recent years. Egypt is facing an annual water deficit of around 7 billion cubic meters and the United Nations is already warning that Egypt could run out of water by the year 2025.⁴¹ Egypt sees the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam as an existential threat and has expressed increasing alarm over Ethiopia's mega-dam project, fearing it could reduce its share of the Nile waters. Sudan, with much larger water resources than Egypt, also suffers from a scarcity of water resources and this scarcity is increasing year by year. Sudan's total water resources are now estimated at 30 billion cubic meters. 20.5 billion of the resources are estimated to come from the River Nile and its tributaries, 5.5 billion from seasonal rivers, and 4 billion from groundwater sources. Sudan's

³⁸ Ethiopia leader rejects call for World Bank arbitration in dam dispute with Egypt, *Ahram Online*, January 21, 2018.

³⁹ Egypt, Sudan launches joint military exercises dubbed 'Nile's Eagles-1', *Al Arabiya*, November 14, 2020.

⁴⁰ Saifeldin Yousif Saeed, Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam and its impact on Sudanese water security, *Sudan Tribune*, January 7, 2018.

⁴¹ [Amir Dakkak](#), Egypt's Water Crisis – Recipe for Disaster, *EcoMENA*, [July 22, 2017](#).

estimated water requirement in the period 2012 - 2027 is approximately 33 billion cubic meters. These 3 billion deficits highlight the growing demand for water in that period.⁴² Sudan also needs reassurance on the safety of the GERD, since if this were to crack or even collapse the resulting floods could inundate Khartoum.⁴³ Ethiopia argues that its dam would have no negative impact on Egypt or Sudan and there will be no reduction of water downstream, as all the Blue Nile water will be cycled through the dam and eventually reach the downstream countries on its way to the Mediterranean. It also claims that more water will be available overall because there will be less evaporation.⁴⁴

The Sudanese position

Sudan and Egypt agreed that Ethiopia's decision to proceed with a second filling for the Renaissance Dam is considered a "unilateral act" that threatens both of their interests. The remarks were announced as part of a joint statement released following a meeting between Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and his Sudanese counterpart Dr. Maryam Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi.⁴⁵

Sudan has announced earlier this year its proposal calling for the formation of an "international quartet" including the US, the European Union, and the UN, along with the African Union to facilitate reaching a deal on the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam. Egypt backs a Sudanese proposal.

Sudan wants Ethiopia to coordinate and share data on dam's operations to avoid flooding and protect its own power-generating dams on the Blue Nile.⁴⁶

Khartoum has become vocal against Ethiopia's second filing and Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok told the 76th UN General Assembly (UNGA) General Debate that Sudan suffered damages during the filling phases of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). "We suffered some of these damages during the first unilateral filling [of the dam] last year and

⁴² Saifeldin Yousif Saeed, Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam and its impact on Sudanese water security, Sudan Tribune, January 7, 2018.

⁴³ Dam negotiations going on: Interview with Ethiopia's ambassador to Cairo, Ahram Online, December 27, 2017.

⁴⁴ Doaa El-Bey, Bringing in the bank, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue 1375, 4-10 January 2018.

⁴⁵ Egypt, Sudan discuss Ethiopian dam during visit by Sudanese FM to Cairo, Arab news, March 2021.

⁴⁶ Egypt Backs Call to Internationalize Ethiopia Dam Dispute, Asharq Al Awsat, February 24, 2021.

the second unilateral filling over the past weeks despite the numerous and costly preventive measures that we have taken to avoid these impacts.”⁴⁷

Hamdok warned that such unilateral acts by the Ethiopian side “threaten the safety of operation of Sudan’s dams and negatively affect irrigation of agricultural projects and drinking water plants.” The Sudanese PM also warned of the negative social, economic, environmental effects of these unilateral acts along the Nile River.⁴⁸

In a meeting with US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman in Khartoum, Sudanese Irrigation Minister Yasser Abbas reiterated Khartoum’s rejection to engage in the GERD negotiations unless they include the regulations of filling and operation of the dam. Abbas said the safety of Sudan’s Roseires Dam on the Blue Nile should come on top of the points to be negotiated. Abbas told Feltman that anticipated GERD negotiations should also tackle conducting environmental and social studies, the exchange of information, and all points related to the continued safe operation of the GERD, Abbas said.⁴⁹

The military cooperation between Egypt and Sudan

Egypt and Sudan have extended their joint relations on security since Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan became president of the transitional Sovereignty Council of Sudan following the ouster of former President Omar Bashir.

During a visit by Egypt's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Mohammed Farid, to Khartoum in November 2020, Egyptian and Sudanese military leaders agreed to accelerate joint security and military cooperation. They also agreed to carry out more drills and step-up cooperation in training, border security, and combating terrorism, as well as technical insurance and military industries.⁵⁰

Egypt and Sudan also signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Egypt's National Organization for Military Production (NOMP) and Sudan’s Military Industry Corporation (MIC)

⁴⁷ Sudan suffered damages due to GERD filling, urges binding deal to avoid further harms, Hamdok tells UNGA, Ahram online, September 25,2021.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ [Amr Kandil](#) , GERD talks must include filling, operation regulations: Sudan tells US, Ahram online, September 30, 2021.

⁵⁰ Egypt, Sudan to strengthen military pact, Arab news, March 2, 2021.

in various manufacturing fields.⁵¹ This visit and the MoU also came at the same time Egypt and Sudan held 'Nile Eagles 1' military drills.⁵²

Joint military exercises

Egypt and Sudan jointly conducted three exercises, " Nile Eagles – 1 " in November 2020 and " Nile Eagles - 2" in March 2021 and - 'Nile Guardians' in May 2021.

The joint exercise - 'The Nile Eagles 1'

In November 2020, Egypt and Sudan have conducted a joint military exercise, dubbed 'The Nile Eagles 1. Units from the Egyptian Air Force and special forces, 'Thunderbolt' have arrived in Sudan at the Merowe airbase in northern Sudan, to conduct a joint air exercise with the Sudanese Air Force.⁵³

Egypt's Army Chief of Staff Lt. General Mohamed Farid and Sudanese Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Mohamed Othman Al-Hussein attended the main phase of the military drill.⁵⁴

The joint exercise - 'The Nile Eagles 2' ⁵⁵

Egypt, Sudan Air Forces carried out joint 'Nile Eagles – 2' at Sudan's Merowe airbase, with the participation of elements from the air forces and Thunderbolt forces from both countries. The early stages of the training included indoctrination procedures to unify concepts and refine skills to efficiently manage joint air operations. It also included implementing many joint sorties the participation of a group of multi-role fighters, to attack targets and protect vital targets.

The Thunderbolt forces on both sides were trained on storming, concealment, and camouflage operations. These would be used to carry out special operations.

⁵¹ Egypt, Sudan sign MoU on military production fields, Ahram online, November 20, 2020.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Egypt's Army Chief of Staff attends main phase of Egyptian-Sudanese 'Nile Eagles 1' military drill, Ahram online, November20, 2020.

⁵⁵ Egypt, Sudan Air Forces carry out joint 'Nile Eagles – 2' training, Egypt Daily News Egypt, March 31, 2021.

The joint exercise - ‘Nile Guardians’

In May 2021, Egypt and Sudan conducted Sudan, a joint military drill dubbed 'Guardians of the Nile', with the participation of land, naval, and air forces from the two countries. 'Guardians of the Nile' aims to promote military cooperation between Egypt and Sudan, exchange relevant expertise, and boost joint action between the Armed Forces of both countries.⁵⁶

Summary

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic nation with a population of 110 million. There are concerns that the rapidly escalating civil war could trigger wider violence in Ethiopia that could even lead to it breaking up. Landlocked Ethiopia borders six countries. Troops from Eritrea are already fighting in Ethiopia and a prolonged crisis could suck in other neighbors and destabilize the volatile Horn of Africa region.

The temporary halt of fighting, the T.P.L.F pullout from the Amhara and Afar regions, and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's call for “national reconciliation” had raised hopes there would be talks to end the war that has killed thousands and left parts of the country on the brink of famine.

The political and military tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia occur at a sensitive time for both. The Sudanese government is facing a political crisis that culminates in an attempted military coup that has been thwarted while the Ethiopian government is facing a civil war in the Tigray region that threatens to spread to other areas.

While the border dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia requires a bilateral solution, in the conflict over the GERD, Egypt is a major factor and any solution will require the consent of all three sides.

Sudan, along with Egypt, has been locked in a bitter dispute over Ethiopia’s GERD for more than a decade. Despite different assessments between Cairo and Khartoum on the dangers of GERD, both countries have drawn closer over the past few months to collaborate and coordinate their position regarding Ethiopia’s steps.⁵⁷

Ethiopia says its dam would have no negative impact on Egypt or Sudan and argues it is vital for its development. Ethiopia also views the alignment between Sudan and Egypt as directed against its interests, which adds more distrust and complication to an already difficult situation.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Egyptian, Sudanese ‘Nile Guardians’ joint military exercise kicks off, Egypt today, May 28, 2021.

⁵⁷ Egypt, Sudan launches joint military exercises dubbed ‘Nile’s Eagles-1’, Al Arabiya, November 14, 2020.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Egypt recently conducted Sudan joint military exercises involving warplanes and special forces. The joint military exercise conducted in May 2021 in Sudan was also intended to send a message to Ethiopia and the international community that if the crisis is not resolved in political ways, there is also a military option.

Both Sudan and Ethiopia seem to prefer to avoid a military confrontation over the GERD and the border dispute between the two countries. But hostilities could escalate due to accident or miscalculation and deterioration could lead to war between the countries and could draw in regional allies and further destabilize the region.

In the absence of any agreement between Ethiopia and Sudan and Egypt, now is the time for the international community to become more involved in the negotiations to prevent a crisis that can destabilize the whole region.

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