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Egypt and Thirsty Neighbors Are at Odds Over Nile

By THANASSIS CAMBANIS

BATANDA, Egypt — One place to begin to understand why this parched country has nearly ruptured relations with its upstream neighbors on the Nile is ankle-deep in mud in the cotton and maize fields of Mohammed Abdallah Sharkawi. The price he pays for the precious resource flooding his farm? Nothing.

“Thanks be to God,” Mr. Sharkawi said of the Nile River water. He raised his hands to the sky, then gestured toward a state functionary visiting his farm. “Everything is from God, and from the ministry.”

But perhaps not for much longer. Upstream countries, looking to right what they say are historic wrongs, have joined in an attempt to break Egypt and Sudan’s near-monopoly on the water, threatening a crisis that Egyptian experts said could, at its most extreme, lead to war.

“Not only is [Egypt](#) the gift of the Nile, this is a country that is almost completely dependent on Nile water resources,” said a spokesman for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Hossam Zaki. “We have a growing population and growing needs. There is no way we can accept this kind of threat.”

Ever since civilization first sprang forth here, Egyptians have clustered along the Nile’s silt-rich banks. Almost all of the country’s 80 million people live within a few miles of the river, and farmers like Mr. Sharkawi have hardly changed their farming methods in four millennia. Egypt’s population is growing briskly, however, and by the year 2017 at current rates of usage the Nile’s water will barely meet Egypt’s basic needs, according to the Ministry of Irrigation.

And that is assuming that the river’s flow is undiminished. Under British colonial rule, a 1929 treaty reserved 80 percent of the Nile’s entire flow for Egypt and Sudan, then ruled as a single country. That treaty was reaffirmed in 1959. Usually upstream countries dominate control of a river, like the Tigris and Euphrates, which are much reduced by the time they flow into Iraq from Turkey and Syria. The case of the Nile is reversed because the British colonials who controlled the

region wanted to guarantee water for Egyptian agriculture.

The seven upstream countries — Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda — say the treaty is an unfair vestige of colonialism, while Egypt says those countries are awash in water resources, unlike arid Egypt, which depends on just one.

Today's confrontation has unfolded in slow motion. In April, negotiations between the nine Nile countries broke down after Egypt and Sudan refused to give ground. The upstream countries quickly got together and in May came up with a formula that would free them to build their own irrigation projects and dams, reducing the flow to Lake Nasser, the vast man-made reservoir that straddles Egypt and Sudan.

So far Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and Rwanda have signed the new Nile basin accord, which would require only a simple majority of member countries to approve new projects. Egypt wants to retain veto power over projects in any country, and with Sudan argues that the main provisions of the colonial-era treaty should be preserved.

Congo and Burundi have not yet taken sides. Egypt and Sudan have until May 2011 to resume negotiations, or else the upstream countries will activate the new agreement.

The threat of losing Nile water has animated Egypt, which until recently had virtually ignored the upstream countries. And Cairo received another jolt this spring, when Ethiopia inaugurated a \$520 million [hydroelectric](#) dam on a Nile tributary, part of a decade-long project to create a modern electricity infrastructure. Italy, Ethiopia and the European Investment Bank financed the project, according to Ethiopian media reports.

Adding urgency, say diplomats and water experts in Egypt, investors from China and the Persian Gulf region have expressed interest in underwriting enormous agriculture projects in Uganda and Ethiopia, which would use Nile water.

Currently, several upstream nations, including Ethiopia and Uganda, are planning hydroelectric dams. If the upstream countries move slowly and fill the reservoirs over a period of 5 to 15 years, however, Egyptian officials concede that the hydroelectric plants will not significantly hurt Egyptian consumption.

Egyptian officials are also confident that the [World Bank](#), the traditional donor for dams, would not approve them over Cairo's objections, even if the officials remain concerned that governments and private investors might feel free to lend the money.

But agricultural projects, potentially far more damaging to Egypt, are another matter. Not only would they permanently reduce the amount of water that reaches Egypt's border, but they have also already attracted the interest of wealthy Arab nations and the Chinese, who see an enormous profit potential in them.

Egyptian water experts said that the upstream countries wasted colossal amounts of water that run off unused into swamps. The upstream countries point to Egypt's own wasteful practices, saying that 75 percent of Egypt's water is used for agriculture, most of it wasted by inefficient, old-fashioned practices.

"I feel that we are all mad," said Diaa el-Quosy, an American-trained water expert who advises Egypt's irrigation minister. "Everyone wants to take his own share and then more." He said that once political tensions cooled, the nine Nile basin countries could find "creative solutions" to manage the river's flow effectively. "There is water enough for everyone," he said.

In Egypt, however, decades of bellicose rhetoric about the Nile have made the river's water an explosive issue. "Violating Egypt's quota of Nile water is a genocidal war against 80 million people," an Egyptian commentator, Hazem el-Beblawi, wrote this year in *Al Masry Al Youm*, an Egyptian daily.

Water experts say that Egypt has done little to curtail its own misuse of water.

Despite periodic government efforts to promote less wasteful practices, irrigation water still flows largely through dirt channels often choked with weeds. Much of it leaches into the ground before reaching crops. "Egypt doesn't act like a country dying of thirst," said Dan Morrison, author of "The Black Nile," in which he chronicled his journey from the river's origins to its mouth at the Mediterranean, and encountered the most pronounced waste in Egypt. So long as water is free for farmers, Mr. Morrison said, there is little incentive to conserve.

One solution Mr. Morrison proposed would entail Egypt's importing food staples from upstream nations that can farm more efficiently with Nile water.

Isam Abdurahman, a Ministry of Agriculture farm supervisor, said the government was taking steps to try to conserve water, including paving some irrigation canals and managing farmers more strictly. This year, for instance, because of low river levels, rice cultivation was banned entirely in some areas, while the cotton quota was severely restricted. Mr. Sharkawi was permitted to plant only one field with cotton, rather than four.

And in a few desert areas like Toshka, near the Sudanese border, Egypt has experimented with large-scale modern drip irrigation. The vast majority of its farmers, however, are small land holders like Mr. Sharkawi, who cultivates maize, cotton and alfalfa in the Nile Delta.

He cannot afford to invest in drip irrigation or sprinkler systems that would lose less water to evaporation. Furthermore, like most Egyptian family farmers, he favors the most water-hogging crops, like rice, maize and cotton, rather than lower-intensity fruits and vegetables.

Upstream leaders like Ethiopia's prime minister caution that Nile water use is "not a zero-sum game," but in Egypt's Delta that's exactly how millions of farmers view it. If he had to pay for his water, Mr. Sharkawi said, he simply would lose his land. "Since the time of the ancient Egyptians," he said, "we've always lived like this. It is the same for me, and it will be the same for my children."