

International

Nile dam dispute spills onto the social media

Citizens sparring online over rights to the mighty waterway

CAIRO: As Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan struggle to resolve a long-running dispute over Addis Ababa's mega-dam project on the Nile, some of their citizens are sparring online over their rights to the mighty waterway. For nearly a decade, multiple rounds of talks between Cairo, Addis Ababa and Khartoum have failed to produce a deal over the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Anxiety has mounted in downstream Sudan and Egypt, which fear for their vital water supplies after upstream Ethiopia declared plans to start filling Africa's largest dam reservoir in July. As tensions have run high in the political arena, they have also amped up online. In one widely viewed video originally shared on TikTok, an Ethiopian woman pours water from a pitcher into two cups representing Egypt and Sudan. She fills Sudan's cup to the brim but only pours a trickle of water into Egypt's, before emptying the water back into the pitcher. "This is my water. When I give you water, it's my call, not yours," she says.

In response, an Egyptian woman created a compilation of the video and one of her own in which she knocks down a dam-shaped block structure with the Ethiopian flag superimposed on it before triumphantly downing a cup of water. The video had been viewed more than 55,000 times on Instagram by Wednesday. Social media "platforms are powerful," said Wubalem Fekade, communications head at the intergovernmental ENTRO-Nile Basin Initiative. "People on the social media platforms aren't accountable, so it's easy to disseminate unverified, incorrect, false, even conspiracy theories," he said. But, he added hopefully, "when used creatively and judiciously, they can help defuse tensions".

'Psychological war'

The online row over the dam has been par-

ticularly heated between Egyptian and Ethiopian social media users. Egypt has long enjoyed the lion's share of the Nile water under decades-old agreements that were largely viewed by other Nile basin countries as unfair. On Twitter, Egyptians echoed authorities' fears that Ethiopia's dam would severely cut their country's supply of water from the Nile, which provides 97 percent of the arid nation's water needs.

"We will never allow any country to starve us" of water, Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris wrote on Twitter. "If Ethiopia doesn't come to reason, we, the Egyptian people will be the first to call for war," he threatened. Egyptian cartoonist Ahmed Diab has weighed in with a drawing of an outsized Egyptian soldier, rifle slung over his shoulder, facing a diminutive Ethiopian man with the dam in the background.

"You idiot, try to understand that I care for you... ever heard about the Bar Lev Line?" the soldier tells the Ethiopian, alluding to Egypt's military strength in referring to the Egyptian destruction of an Israeli defence line along the Suez canal in 1973. Diab called the cartoon part of a "psychological war". "Besides a show of military might and strong media discourse, arts can boost people's morale," he said. For their part, Ethiopians have rallied behind their country's mega project, set to become Africa's largest hydroelectric installation.

On social media, they have rejected any conditions of reaching a deal before filling the dam. Filling the dam should not be held "hostage" to an agreement with Cairo, Ethiopian activist Jawar Mohamed wrote on Twitter. "If agreement is reached before the filling begins in the coming days, it's great. If not, the filling should begin and the negotiation shall continue," he said. Ethiopia, one of Africa's fastest growing



GUBA, Ethiopia: Photo captured a general view of the Blue Nile river as it passes through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), near Guba in Ethiopia. — AFP

economies, insists the dam will not affect the onward flow of water and sees the project as indispensable for its national development and electrification.

'Healthy discussions'

Khartoum hopes the dam will help regulate flooding, but in June it warned that millions of lives will be at "great risk" if Ethiopia unilaterally fills the dam. In a letter to the United Nations Security Council, Sudan raised concerns that water discharged from the GERD could "compromise the safety" of its own Roseires Dam by overwhelming it and causing flooding. Omar Dafallah,

a Sudanese artist, depicted Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed overseeing the water flowing from the dam through a faucet to fill a jug held by Sudan's Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

The drawing also shows Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi with a large water container, waiting in line. Last month, Egypt also appealed to the UNSC to intervene in the crisis—a move Sisi said underlined his country's commitment to a political solution. Egyptian lawmaker Mohamed Fouad views the online debate as a way to "break the stalemate" in the diplomatic talks, "so long as they remain within the boundaries of healthy discussions". — AFP

Native Americans, Polynesians shared DNA 800 years ago

PARIS: Native Americans and Polynesians bridged vast expanses of open ocean around the year 1200 and mingled, leaving incontrovertible proof of their encounter in the DNA of present-day populations, scientists revealed Wednesday. Whether peoples from what is today Colombia or Ecuador drifted thousands of kilometers to tiny islands in the middle of the Pacific, or whether seafaring Polynesians sailed upwind to South America and then back again is still unknown. But what is certain, according to a study in *Nature*, is that the hook up took place hundreds of years before Europeans set foot in either region, and left individuals scattered across French Polynesia with signature traces of the New World in their DNA.

"These findings change our understanding of one of the most unknown chapters in the history of our species' great continental expansions," senior author Andreas Moreno-Estrada, principal investigator at Mexico's National Laboratory of Genomics for Biodiversity, told AFP. Archeologists and historians have tussled for decades over whether Oceania islanders and native Americans crossed paths during the Middle Ages, and how, if they did, that contact might have unfolded.

In 1947, Norwegian explorer and writer Thor Heyerdahl went so far as to build a primitive raft - which he called Kon-Tiki, after an Inca god - and sailed from Peru nearly 7,000 kilometers for 101 days before crashing into Tuamotus in French Polynesia. As it turns out, that is one of the islands where snippets of New World DNA showed up. Heyerdahl was convinced that people from Peru had populated the remote Pacific islands, and wanted to show it was possible. But he only got it half-right, it seems.

"It is more likely that Polynesians reached the Americas, given their voyaging technology and demonstrated ability to cross thousands of miles of open ocean," lead author Alexander Ioannidis, a postdoctoral researcher at Stanford University said. Travelling in outrigger canoes, Polynesians established settlements across a vast area inside a triangle formed by the Hawaiian Islands, Easter Island and New Zealand. Up to now, probably the most compelling evidence that pre-American and Polynesian cultures intersected was the sweet potato. "It is native to the Americas, yet it was also on islands thousands of miles away before European contact," Ioannidis said.

Moreover, Polynesian words for the yellowish tuber are similar to those in indigenous American languages in the Andes. But sceptics pointed out that sweet potatoes shoots might have made it half-way across the Pacific on their own, on a piece of driftwood, for example. To look for possible points of convergence, researchers collected genetic data from 15 native American groups along the Pacific coast of South and Central America, and from 17 Polynesian islands - more than 800 individuals in all. "We looked for long sequences of DNA with exactly the same code," said Ioannidis. — AFP

Hezbollah-linked tycoon returns after US release

BEIRUT: A Lebanese businessman jailed in the United States over allegations of funding Shiite movement Hezbollah arrived back in Beirut Wednesday, his family said, after he was granted early release from prison due to poor health. Kassim Tajideen, 64, had been extradited to the United States after he was designated as a financier of Hezbollah, a key Lebanese political player that Washington has listed as a "terrorist organization". In late May, a US judge granted an emergency request for compassionate release on the grounds that Tajideen's age and "serious health conditions" made him vulnerable to the novel coronavirus in prison.

His family in a statement welcomed "his return to Beirut after a painful absence of over three years in prison in the United States". It said his return, which was also reported by the National News Agency, had been delayed "until a plane was provided to transport him and other Lebanese citizens from the United States to Lebanon". Tajideen's release has stirred speculation it was a US response to Lebanon's release in March of Amer al-Fakhoury, a naturalized US citizen and former member of a pro-Israel militia accused of torture as a prison warden. — AFP