Egypt’s takeover of Sudan’s Gezira scheme

Published: 19 Dec 2010

Short URL: https://farmlandgrab.org/17750

Posted in: Egypt Ethiopia GCC Sudan

By Professor Ali Abdalla Ali

December 19, 2010 — It came out in the Sudanese daily papers during September 2010 that the Sudanese Ministry of Agriculture had signed an agreement with the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture in the context of the Sudanese Egyptian Protocol of Cooperation between the two countries.

The intention is to develop one million acres of the famous Gezira Scheme in the Sudan i.e. half of the total area of

The Gezira scheme main canal and the Managil extension are used by farmers for drinking water and fishing (Photo: UNEP)
the Scheme which is 2.2 million feddan in accordance with a certain contract through which public and private Egyptian corporations will provide all the necessary inputs and the production of agricultural products to be exported to Egypt in a very strict schedule. Any delay in exporting the agricultural products to Egypt will be faced by penalties by the Egyptian side. There is no indication as to whether the whole production thus realized will all be exported to Egypt. This is in a very striking contrast with the Chinese who in their cooperation with Sudan in the area of agriculture, the representative of foreign trade declared that none of the production will be exported to China before the Sudanese people are fully satisfied of that production.

The news had aroused very vehement protest from the Sudanese Farmer’s Union and the tenants in the Gezira Scheme as well as commentators in the Sudanese media. Their argument was that no activity shall take place before the issue of the landownership in the Scheme is settled by the government. Some even described the deal as tantamount to a serious betrayal of the Sudanese tenants, farmers and the Sudanese people since the Scheme played a very significant role in the life of the Sudanese people for over seventy years.

The agreement was to be signed this October during the annual meeting of the Sudanese Egyptian Ministerial Committee. Suddenly it came in the news that the meeting of the joint committee in October has been adjourned indefinitely! Some explain this sudden deferment might be due to the pressures on the Sudanese side not to allow the idea to be executed at the expense of the Sudanese landowners and farmers. On 12.10.2010 the Gezira TV news indicated that the President of Egypt had declared that Egypt intends to invest US $2 billion in Ethiopia. This seems to be a message to the Sudanese that Egypt has other choices than Sudan. The Egyptian authority forgets that if Sudan is not for sale, it should remember that Ethiopia is also not for sale!

Now the purpose of this article is to try to understand the motivations which had made Egypt venture and propose the project mentioned above to the Sudan government. In fact when news came out about the project as uttered by the Egyptian Minister of Agriculture, it was immediately refuted by the Sudanese Minister of Agriculture who indicated that such news is not true at all.

The Egyptian Minister of Agriculture was very emphatic about the idea but since the whole matter was postponed it seems that there might have been there a drop of truth about it and that the Sudanese authorities had revised their minds about the idea. The government has too many problems at hand.

Since the talk about the Nile waters started some years ago, there has a gradual move by the Egyptian authorities to talk about the possibility of investing in Sudanese agriculture. This was to be done through abandoning the cultivation of crops that use more water such as wheat, rice etc. in Egypt and to cultivate such and other crops in the Sudan never mentioning as to whether such activity will have to be irrigated against the allocation of Sudan in the Nile waters (see our article "Investing in Agriculture is More Dangerous than Building Dams," in ST of 30.4.2010). Certain Egyptian companies came to the Sudan with the intention of acquiring large tracts of land for agriculture. In fact a company called Boulton which is Egyptian owned in real terms and declared a type of cooperation between it and Kenana Sugar Company to invest in Sudanese agriculture. This company came under criticism through part of the Sudanese media. The idea was not very different from the present intentions. Agricultural production was to be exported to Egypt and part of it processed in Egypt since Sudan is claimed to have no industrial base especially in food industries. So the value added to such production will go to Egypt and not Sudan. In fact one’s own view knowing Kenana since its inception that Kenana does not really need to cooperate with any outside company. Since it proved to be a very viable venture that accumulated considerable Sudanese abilities and technology that had qualified it to become responsible for Sudan’s other large schemes. In fact Boulton company will take advantage of this accumulated experience and technology without taking part in its creation. This accumulated knowledge should be used to the advantage of the Sudanese as well as Sudanese agriculture.

Again some months ago the Egyptian ambassador in Khartoum declared that Egypt is to get three million feddan of land to produce agricultural products with the least mention as to where the water for irrigation of such lands will come from. In another instance the Egyptian Minister of Agriculture once declared that he will visit Sudan to see what the foreign investors (referring to Arab and other investors) are doing in Sudan as if Sudan is still part and parcel of the Egyptian administration and territory. The question that comes up is that during the seventies and eighties a number of joint companies were established between the Sudan and Egypt. Such companies remained idle and ineffective in producing anything. They just held large tracts of land without ever being able to make such land produce any food whether for the Sudan or for Egypt. As we have indicated before in one of our previous articles in this WS that Egypt had never the intention to see Sudan become a strong agricultural country because if Sudan became the granary of the Arab world it will also become economically strong and consequently politically strong. This is something which Egyptian strategy never wished to happen.

In fact from these instances it is clear that Egypt’s motivations are as follows:

• Politically Sudan is at present experiencing many political problems including the execution of the CPA, the problem of Darfur, the problem of Eastern Sudan, the repercussions of the ICC, the economic scene which has been largely dependent on oil of which 70% of its revenues will accrue to the Government of South Sudan (GOSS) in case
In a recent paper by John Waterbury of the University of Princeton and the American University of Beirut whose movements for the purpose of destabilizing the Horn of Africa. Reuter on November 26, 2010 reported that, "PM Meles Zenawi accused Egypt of aiding unspecified rebel to check their backyards for problems that might be traced to Cairo's latest diplomatic sabotages."

Still waiting to see the war fought by Egyptian soldiers in military uniform, invading their territories have definitely missed the point. It is time that the riparian countries currently in (sic) loggerheads with Egypt over the Nile water to check their backyards for problems that might be traced to Cairo’s latest diplomatic sabotages.

• In a recent paper by John Waterbury of the University of Princeton and the American University of Beirut whose...
title is, "Egypt's Nile: A Matter of Life or Death," calls for cooperation among the riparian countries. He makes a number of observations and draws three conclusions from these observations; First the Egyptian Economy and workforce have evolved far beyond the country's traditional agricultural base. Agriculture is no longer the driving force of the Egyptian economy, but it continues to use 88% of Egypt's available water. This means that 1m3 of water produces about 18 US cents of national product while 1m3 in the non-agricultural sector produces about 18 US or over 50 times as much. Second, with a relatively fixed amount of water, Egypt has succeeded in increasing the efficiency with which it used in agriculture. It has also increased its effective annual supply to something like 70 bcm. That includes ground water use, recycled drainage water and treated waste water. Most astounding is the amount of water imported into Egyptian agricultural produce and products, including meat and poultry. In recent years this water, called "virtual water" is the equivalent of 20bcm, or over 28% of Egypt's expanded supply. Egypt should be proud of all these achievements, but the message to other riparian States is that there is no absolute amount of water that Egypt has to remain economically healthy. Third, the AHD is no longer a critical factor in Egypt's power supply and it can only become less significant with the passage of time. None of these changes should be seen as unwelcome. Indeed, they are positive signs of a healthy economic transformation, but they do not strengthen Egypt's claims to its 55.5 bcm. "Unquote."

Waterbury then goes on to state that "as a result Egypt’s water supply has never come under pressure from the Sudan. That must have been a source of relief to Egypt’s water planners, but it came at, in my view, at a very high cost, I would argue that it is the long term interest of Egypt to see the rapid development of the Sudanese economy and, by extension, that of Ethiopia as well. Between the two there is a potential market of well over 100 million people. For some time to come economic growth in both countries will be led by agriculture, as it was in Egypt in the middle of the last century. Should Egypt impede or encourage that kind development? To encourage it might entail renegotiating the 1959 agreement to include the other Nile Basin Riparian countries and to reorganize their legitimate claims to some share in the Nile waters. I think this would be in Egypt’s long term interest because it would contribute to developing more prosperous markets for Egyptian goods and services in its neighborhood. It might also contribute to political stability in two large neighbors that can have a highly destabilizing effect when they are affected with turmoil and occasional violence. "Unquote."

Waterbury concluded his very valuable paper by saying, "What Egypt faces then are not life and death issues of water supply, but rather choices in the agricultural sector that reflect where the country is headed anyway. Acting on the recognition of this transition will mean that everyone in the Nile Basin stands to benefit from a new frame of sharing the river. "Unquote."

Although one is in full agreement with the observations and ideas contained in this very comprehensive and sincere paper by Waterbury especially his call to Egypt to cooperate, yet having been observing the relations between the Sudan and Egypt during the last three decades or more one is not very optimistic as to whether the Egyptian authorities (and not the people) realize the significance of these ideas as detailed by Waterbury!! History taught its proven laws of change to all. Among them is the fact that interests, despite how long it was maintained with whatever means and tools, must clash at some point in time.

FIRST; It seems that it will not be easy for official Egypt to erase from its mind that the world has changed and new interests surfaced-up by the end of the 2nd WW II, and that many waters ran underneath. Said in another way, Sudan or Ethiopia or any of the riparian country's needs has changed over the decades and since they have obtained their political independence. This is so because Egypt is ever sensitive about the Nile waters and the security of its own population which is extremely legitimate and fair. However, this care and attention while acceptable should not be at the expense of all others who share with Egypt this great gift from God. When the Greek philosopher in the 4th century described Egypt as the Gift of the Nile, by which he meant that the Nile made Egypt and not the vice versa, he might not have realized that there were so many people upstream who also depended on their living on this very Nile waters as a crucial factor of production that created once the famous North Sudan and Egyptian Pharaoh Civilization. Such nostalgic and even selfish attitude on the part of Egypt does not seem to wane because Egypt in spite of its great achievements in the economic field and adaptation of technology seem to be still very much trapped in history as if it has never changed or they can control it for its own interests for ever.

SECOND: cooperation among the Nile Valley people was always advocated in many forums and by many of those concerned since all share a common important life input which is water. Egypt had long been the virtual user of the Nile water and so got used to believing that no one else should share such a resource with it as if it was given an eternal right from somewhere and there exists no other interests in it from somewhere else in the universe that we actually all share it. Now that the Riparian Countries woke up claiming their right in a resource which first originates from the lands, Egypt does not see that except in the context of a conspiracy against its livelihood and existence. Therefore, any call for cooperation is carried out by Egypt in the context of such eternal right for the Nile water as well in the context of its own strategy which takes into consideration its own interest even if it is at the expense of the members of the Nile Valley! Otherwise how can we understand the unusual objections of Egypt when Ethiopia started constructing its own dams on the Blue Nile, in spite of the fact that the Blue Nile originates from the Ethiopian Highlands? In other words Ethiopian people have to suffer from droughts in order for the
Egyptian population to survive.

THIRD: One valuable advice stated by Waterbury is that for Egypt to help in the development of both Sudan and by extension Ethiopia, it will have two stable countries in the neighborhood. One would like to state emphatically that this is something which Egypt will never do or accept. There are so many historical incidents which prove that Egypt was behind the partial underdevelopment of the Sudan (see our paper, "The role of Egypt in the development and underdevelopment of the Sudan", in ST 2010). To state just two examples, one is the subtle resistance to the heightening of the Roseires Dam on the Blue Nile for almost four decades, which would have availed 4 bcm to irrigate the fertile lands on both the shores of the Nile. Another example is the resistance in the creation of the Arab Authority for Agricultural and Investment and Development (AAAID) which was supposed to make the Sudan the granary of the Arab world. Egypt insisted that it should be chaired by an Egyptian, who was not really meant to develop it with Arab money but to reduce its effectiveness to such an extent that AAAID will not be able to attract Arab funds to develop the Sudan. If Sudan became economically strong, it would also become politically strong. Such a matter that Egypt never desired. If Egypt were to help develop Sudan, why then was it trying to take over one million acres of land or half of the Gezira Scheme, using Sudan’s share of the Nile water, in order to develop agricultural products that were to be exported to Egypt immediately after harvest. Would Egypt ever think of helping the Sudan in improving its Cotton in the Gezira, and, therefore, create a competitor for it?!! I guess the same would apply to Ethiopia. One is not good in politics but one’s own feeling is that Egypt’s strategy is to try to keep the countries around it under its control. That is why it is not surprising to read about the Ugandan diplomat who called upon the riparian countries to be careful of Egypt (The Observer-Uganda-December 2010) or the statements made by the Ethiopian PM Meles Zenawi who said on 14.12.2010 to Reuter that, "The only solution to the Nile water sharing issue was one that satisfied all parties and takes into account their interests without prejudice against any country." He added that, "the seven upper riparian countries have no agenda of benefiting themselves at the expense of Egypt and Sudan. "Unquote."

It is, therefore, clear that considerable change in mind and heart has to take place in the attitudes of Egypt towards its neighbors to create a real win-win cooperation with its partners in the Nile Valley.

In conclusion the attempt of Egypt to take over one million Feddan from the Gezira Scheme should not be thought of in isolation of the overall selfish and narrow strategy which aims at preserving Egypt’s national and other interests in ways that will not achieve any win-win situation. Moreover, such an attitude shall not abate the distrust of the other members of the riparian countries in whatever suggestions that Egypt usually throws out from time to time. The Nile to Egypt as mentioned by Waterbury is not a question of life and death but rather a question of choices as stated above !!

Ali Abdalla Ali, is Professor of Economics, Omdurman Ahlia University and Economic Advisor, Khartoum Stock Exchange, Sudan. He can reached at: aliabdalla.abd@gmail.com

Source: Sudan Tribune
Welcome to the new farmlandgrab.org! We have closed the site's social media accounts - please follow @GRAIN_org on Twitter and @GRAIN.org on Facebook instead. Thank you!

Who's involved?

Languages

- Amharic
- Bahasa Indonesia
- Català
- Catala
- Dansk
- Deutsch
- English
- Español
- français
- Italiano
- Kurdish
- Malagasy
- Nederlands
- Português
- Suomi
- Svenska
- Türkçe

Special content

- audio
- contracts
- off-topic
- video
- water
- wikileaks
- women

Archives

Select month

- Cameroun. Socapalm, des terres agricoles louées à prix d’ami
  - 06 Jun 2018

- Bolloré’s Belgian friend in court
  - 06 Jun 2018

- Stop parading RSPO certificate, ERA charges Okomu Oil
  - 06 Jun 2018

- Failed farmland deals: a growing legacy of disaster and pain
  - 06 Jun 2018

- En toute propriété
  - 05 Jun 2018
The ripple effect caused by closure of Sher Karuturi Flower Farm
05 Jun 2018

Un projet d’accaparement de terres déguisé en promesse de développement
05 Jun 2018

Vincent Bolloré perd un nouveau procès de presse en France
05 Jun 2018

Les paysans varois manifestent devant le vignoble de Vincent Bolloré à la Croix-Valmer
05 Jun 2018

Karuturi workers accuse CFC Stanbic Bank for the malpractice
06 Jun 2018

Cameroun. Socapalm, des terres agricoles louées à prix d’ami
06 Jun 2018

Bollore’s Belgian friend in court
06 Jun 2018

Stop parading RSPO certificate, ERA charges Okomu Oil
06 Jun 2018

Failed farmland deals: a growing legacy of disaster and pain
06 Jun 2018

En toute propriété
05 Jun 2018

The ripple effect caused by closure of Sher Karuturi Flower Farm
05 Jun 2018

Un projet d’accaparement de terres déguisé en promesse de développement
Vincent Bolloré perd un nouveau procès de presse en France

05 Jun 2018

Les paysans varois manifestent devant le vignoble de Vincent Bolloré à la Croix-Valmer

05 Jun 2018

Kerry

Very interesting work/list. So what is the pathway forward? What are the policy options? Social movement?
25 May 2018

John

Of all the agricultural land in Australia suitable for growing food what percentage is now owned by foreign investors? 5, 10, 15% or more and when do y...
25 May 2018

boucard

Comment se procurer ce film pour des débats publics. Peuples solidaires, association à laquelle j'appartiens, a organisé la semaine dernière une r...
11 May 2017

Elijah

Was pleased to read your article. I am however surprised that the story of the frustration that DFL is going through with the investor being harassed b...
10 Feb 2017

sebastian

Excelente trabajo de investigación. Se los agradezco mucho. Consultaré todas las fuentes que ustedes proporcionan para tener un informe más acabado c...
09 Dec 2016

Anonymous

La critique est facile mais l'art difficile; j'ai rarement vu des ONG créer des emplois et contribuer au développement socio-économique autant que d...
29 Nov 2016

Christopher Ajua

The same political and economic problems that existed in Cameroon during these crises persist and continue to plague the lives of Cameroonians, especia...
26 Nov 2016