

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Egypt presents Nile development plan

An ambitious project to expand the river's hydroelectric potential was presented on Capitol Hill.

Dr. Boutros Ghali, the Egyptian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, gave a compelling presentation here Sept. 25, on the need and potential for canal and related water infrastructure development in the nine African nations that rely on the Nile River.

Ghali addressed a meeting of the Global Water Policy and Technology Summits on Capitol Hill. The meetings are organized by the Global Strategy Council and are aimed toward a world water development conference, to be hosted by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo next summer.

Ghali's vision of an enormous upgrading of the water and hydroelectric yield potential of the Nile was in sharp contrast to the zero-growth bleatings of his host at the forum, Sen. Albert Gore (D-Tenn.).

Ghali contended that the nine nations through which the Nile runs will need to work together to gain an additional 10 billion cubic meters of water per year from the river within the next 20 years.

While the population of Egypt is projected to almost double from its present 52 million by that time, the increase can be met by effective investment in canals and related infrastructure, which will enable the participating nations to sell hydroelectric power to customers as far away as the European Community.

Ghali said that efforts have been under way to achieve a cooperative approach to development of the Nile since 1980, when the Lagos Plan of Action was drafted by the Organization of African Unity. However, he said, significant progress was impos-

sible as long as the Marxist regime in Ethiopia was not willing to participate. Since 85% of the Nile's water originates in Ethiopia, any real progress toward improving its yield potential was not possible without the cooperation of that country.

Ghali has traveled to the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa 11 times to seek cooperation, and finally succeeded when the government there sent a signal six months ago of its willingness to negotiate. In the meantime, he said, the U.N. has responded to a request by the participating nations to prepare two reports: a feasibility study for a network of transport canals, roads, railways, and hydroelectric facilities on the Nile; and a report outlining potential means of collaboration among the nine nations. Both were completed in September.

The collaboration among the nine nations would be based on deriving different benefits from development of the river. Those nations that need the additional water most, such as Egypt, would exchange the water for a return of hydroelectric power, which would benefit the Upper Nile countries.

Dr. Ghali said that the potential for improving the infrastructure along the Nile is so great, that a surplus of power could, with the use of new microprocessing technology, be up for sale to other countries in the Middle East, and even in Europe.

He said that the major obstacles to progress in such a visionary plan include: 1) political instability in the region, notably the conflicts in Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia, and conflict between the nations of Kenya and

Uganda, and Rwanda and Burundi; 2) a limited awareness of the seriousness of the impending water shortage crisis in the area; and, 3) the need for a major influx of foreign aid to realize the huge potential of the project, with the \$80 billion in foreign debt owed by the Nile countries being a major impediment now to such aid.

Of the three, he said, the most intractable problem is the political instability, although the recent decision of Ethiopia to enter into the development talks is a hopeful sign.

Another species of problem was manifested by the outrageous behavior of Senator Gore, who tried to "summarize" Ghali's presentation by twisting its meaning into a polemic against population growth and polluted water.

Gore even implied that water is not a benefit, but actually a bane to the Third World, by ranting about the effect of "water-borne diseases" which kill so many people.

Dr. Ghali responded by saying, "We in the Third World do not have the luxury of choosing between the quantity and quality of our water. At this point, what is vital for our survival is quantity."

As to Gore's absurd charge that "water is the primary source of death and disease" in the Third World, Dr. Ghali countered with some facts. He detailed how his government's rigorous health and public education campaign has been highly successful in reducing the incidence of water-borne disease in Egypt.

By establishing safe water wells and small hospitals to dispense medication, and combining these with a 10-minute television warning aired three times daily cautioning against drinking from or bathing directly in the Nile, the incidence of disease has dropped dramatically, he said.