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Water, irrigation and energy minister Seleshi Bekele says that Ethiopia has rejected Egypt's proposal on the operations of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) that Ethiopia is building on the Nile. The National Intelligence Security Services (NISS) foils a terrorist attack planned by Al Shabab and Islamic State (IS) militants. A coalition of 57 opposition parties threatens to boycott the general election in 2020 as they claim the electoral law is biased towards the ruling party.

Those dam water talks with Egypt ...

Water, irrigation and energy minister **Seleshi Bekele** announced on 18 September that **Ethiopia** has rejected **Egypt's** proposal on the operations of the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)** that Ethiopia is building on the **Nile**.¹ If negotiations between Ethiopia, Egypt and **Sudan** from 30 September to 1 October in **Khartoum** (Sudan) are equally disastrous, it could lead to severe tensions in the **Horn of Africa**. Foreign affairs ministry spokesperson **Nebiyat Getachew Assegid** said on 20 September that the dispute would not affect the ongoing construction of GERD.²

Sileshi said at a press conference in **Addis Ababa** that Ethiopia would put forward a different proposal.

*"The proposal from Egypt was unilaterally decided ...[it] didn't consider our previous agreements. We can't agree with this ... we will prepare our counter-proposal."*³

In a statement to the **Ethiopian News Agency (ENA)** on 20 September, Nebiyat was very critical of Egypt's latest proposal on the dam project and claimed it was "*against the sovereignty of Ethiopia*".⁴ The announcement came days after Egypt said that talks over the project had failed to achieve progress. Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan met on 15-16 September for their first talks over the hydroelectric dam in more than a year.

Ethiopia and Egypt disagree over the annual flow of water that should be guaranteed to Egypt and how to manage flows during droughts. Egypt relies on the Nile for 90% of its fresh water, and it wants the GERD's reservoir to release a higher volume of water than Ethiopia is willing to guarantee, among other disagreements. The Nile serves as a lifeline for Egypt's 100 million people. While Egypt fears for its freshwater supply, Ethiopia promises economic benefits for both itself and Sudan.

Relations between Ethiopia and Egypt have simmered in recent years, but they remain deadlocked. An April 2018 leadership transition in Ethiopia eased tensions between Addis Ababa and **Cairo**. Prime minister **Abiy Ahmed** (2018-present) visited Cairo in June 2018 and promised to ensure that Ethiopia's development projects do not harm Egypt. Egyptian President **Abdel Fattah al-Sisi** (2014-present) responded by saying that the dispute has no military solution.

However, the parties have made little headway in resolving disagreements over the GERD project. **Belgium**-based conflict prevention non-government organisation **International Crisis Group (ICG)**

¹ Reuters, 19 Sep 2019

² Borkena, 20 Sep 2019

³ Borkena, 20 Sep 2019

⁴ The Washington Post, 20 Sep 2019

in March warned that Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan could “blunder into a crisis if they do not strike a bargain before the GERD begins operation.”⁵ ICG recommends a two-step approach:

“The three countries should adopt a two-step approach: first, they should build confidence by agreeing upon terms for filling the dam’s reservoir that does not harm downstream countries. Next, they should negotiate a new, transboundary framework for resource sharing to avert future conflicts.”⁶

The GERD project was announced in 2011 and is designed to be **Africa’s** largest hydroelectric dam and the centrepiece of Ethiopia's bid to become Africa's biggest power exporter, generating more than 6,000 megawatts. Seleshi said in January that following construction delays, the dam would start production by the end of 2020 and be fully operational by 2022.

Worsening water scarcity is also likely to boost tensions over the hydropower dam. **United States-based Dartmouth University** climate change scientists predicted that by 2030 demand for Nile water will exceed supply, and by 2080, almost two-thirds of people living in the upper Nile basin could face water shortages, particularly during hot and dry years.⁷ That could affect close to 250 million in the upper basin by 2080. The scientists posit this shortage to population growth, combined with a hike in hot and dry years.

ICG warns that a deal must be found before the dam is operational, when the risk of violent conflict is significantly higher.

“Outside partners should encourage Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan to approach the dispute not as an existential conflict but as a chance to establish a resource-sharing partnership. Delays in the GERD’s completion and the improved mood following Prime Minister Abiy’s ascent make this moment propitious for negotiating a way forward. Waiting until the dam is operational – when its impact on downstream countries is clearer – would raise the risk of violent conflict.”⁸

Intelligence officials foil terrorist attack

The **National Intelligence Security Services (NISS)** said on 21 September that it had prevented a terrorist attack planned by militants belonging to **Somalia-based Al Shabab** and **Islamic State (IS)** who were planning to carry out attacks on hotels, religious events and public areas in Addis Ababa and across the country.⁹ While Ethiopia has experienced significantly fewer terrorist attacks than its neighbours, Somalia and **Kenya**, its population has become a key target for recruitment by international terrorist groups.

Military deputy chief **Berhanu Jula** told the state-owned **Ethiopian News Agency** that there is evidence the extremist group “has recruited, trained and armed some Ethiopians.”¹⁰ Berhanu warned that the Islamic State group had tried many times in the past to set up base in Ethiopia and that other members of the group are still at large. Prime minister Abiy Ahmed warned in April about attempts by the Al Shabab extremists to make inroads into Ethiopia.

The NISS said some of those arrested were carrying out intelligence work including photographing potential targets. NISS staffer **Muhammed Abdulahi** said domestic intelligence coordinated with neighbouring **Djibouti** and other foreign government intelligence agencies to detain the suspects. Arrests were made in Addis Ababa, **Oromia** and the Somali region.

The **Ethiopian National Defense Force** has a significant presence in border areas with Somalia, a hotspot of Al Shabaab attacks. Al Shabaab militants have carried out numerous attacks in Somalia on military and civilian targets, and it has also conducted attacks abroad including in Kenya. The NISS

⁵ International Crisis Group, 20 Mar 2019

⁶ International Crisis Group, 20 Mar 2019

⁷ Reuters, 28 Aug 2019

⁸ International Crisis Group, 20 Mar 2019

⁹ AP News, 19 Sep 2019

¹⁰ AP News, 19 Sep 2019

said on 11 September it had arrested members of the IS group in towns close to the Somalia and Kenya borders, the first time IS members have been found outside of Somalia.¹¹

The **United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)** says terrorists are likely to carry out attacks in Ethiopia, and that visitors should remain vigilant, especially in crowded areas and public spaces. According to the FCO:

*"The terrorist group Al Shabaab, although based in Somalia, poses a threat across the **East Africa** region. The group continues to link attacks to regional countries' military presence in Somalia as part of an **African Union** peacekeeping mission and continues to threaten all countries who have military forces in Somalia. The Ethiopian authorities have successfully disrupted a number of planned attacks and made a number of arrests. In November 2016, 8 Somali nationals were found guilty of trying to carry out terror attacks in public areas in Addis Ababa and jailed for 9 years."¹²*

Another threat to next year's election

The **Joint Council of Political Parties**, representing 107 opposition parties, threatened on 3 September to boycott the general election in 2020, as they view the electoral law as biased towards the ruling party.¹³ A widespread boycott of Ethiopia's national elections could significantly undermine the government's efforts to maintain political stability and derail its path to democracy, which will do substantial damage to its international reputation and its recent economic progress.

Opposition parties say they were not consulted over the changes to the election law in parliament on 24 August and that the changes make it more difficult for them to contest in elections. The law passed unanimously in parliament, whose current members are all from the ruling coalition, the **Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)**.¹⁴ One of the amendments increased the number of signatures to register a national party to 10,000, up from 1,500 and regional parties to 4,000 signatures, up from 750. Another change opposed by opposition parties is a ban on public servants standing for election unless they resign first. If they lose and are reinstated, they will not be eligible for salaries or benefits for the electoral period. One of the amendments that failed was a proposal to give priority to female candidates if they got an equal number of votes with male opponents in an election.

Joint Council of Political Parties vice-chairman **Girma Bekele** said in regards to the amendments,

"The law was approved in a rush without addressing our demands. If [the law] is going to be applied without addressing our concerns, it will be repeating what has happened in the previous elections where the ruling party won by 100%. We don't want to be a part of that."¹⁵

While Ethiopia has held regular parliamentary elections since the EPRDF took power in 1991, none has been competitive or democratic.

A spate of ethnic violence has also caused some to fear that next year's vote will be postponed (see *ARC Briefing Ethiopia August 2019*). The **National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE)** said in June that insecurity could delay the national election. Government announced in March that the national census would be postponed for a third time due to security concerns. Critics say postponing the national vote could cause an adverse social reaction, further fuel regional conflicts, and damage Abiy's democratic credentials. The **United Nations** estimates that over 1.5 million people were internally displaced, predominantly due to regional conflicts, during 2018.¹⁶ This figure was more than double the existing internally displaced population in the country when the report was published.

¹¹ BBC, 11 Sep 2019

¹² 'Foreign Travel Advice: Ethiopia', gov.uk. Last accessed 23 Sep 2019

¹³ Reuters, 3 Sep 2019

¹⁴ The Africa Report, 29 Aug 2019

¹⁵ Reuters, 3 Sep 2019

¹⁶ 'Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018', United Nations Refugee Agency, 20 June 2019

The NEBE on 29 August granted the **Sidama** community a referendum on self-determination to be held on 13 November.¹⁷ The NEBE said close to 1,700 polling stations and 8,500 election officials would be deployed for the referendum. In July, at least 17 people were killed in clashes between security forces and pro-autonomy activists, while Sidama leaders accepted an offer from the government to hold a referendum within five months (see *ARC Briefing Ethiopia July 2019*).

The referendum could establish the country's 10th autonomous region, where local governments have the ability to choose their official language and have limited powers over taxation, education, health and land administration. A wave of regional independence movements across the country is buoyed by political reforms introduced by Abiy since he took power in 2018. Ahmed's reforms have resulted in the growth of political parties, as groups formerly listed as terrorist organisations transform into prominent political platforms. In the span of a just a few months in early 2019, 27 new parties were formed, bringing the total tally by March to 107.

Planner

24-25 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** Trade Africa International Tourism-Tech Expo;
 24-26 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** Africa Hotel Investment Forum;
 9-12 Oct 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** Addis Power;
 17-19 Oct 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** African Livestock Exhibition and Congress;
 23-25 Oct 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** Social Enterprise World Forum;
 31 Oct-4 Nov 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** Matex Ethiopia Expo;
 1-5 Nov 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** Ethiopia International Trade Expo;
 13 Nov 2019 **Sidama Zone (Ethiopia)** Referendum on self-determination;
 15-17 Nov 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** Agritech Ethiopia;
 25-26 Nov 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** Ethiopia International Mining Conference & Exhibition;
 2020 **(Ethiopia)** Parliamentary elections;

Chronology

21 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *AP News*. The **National Intelligence Security Services** says it has arrested an unspecified number of **Islamist** militants who were planning to carry out attacks in the country;

18 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Reuters*. Water, irrigation and energy minister **Seleshi Bekele** rejects **Egypt's** proposal on the operations of the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam**, deepening the dispute over water resources;

15 Sep 2019 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Reuters*. Foreign minister **Sameh Shoukry** resumes talks with **Sudan** and **Ethiopia** over the \$4 billion **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** amid fears over water supplies from the **Nile River**;

11 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *BBC*. The **National Intelligence Security Services** says it arrested members of the **Islamic State** group in towns close to the **Somalia** and **Kenya** borders, the first time IS members have been found outside of Somalia;

9 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Borkena*. Federal attorney-general **Berhanu Tsegaye** says that the government has granted amnesty to 1,087 prisoners on the eve of the **Ethiopian** new

¹⁷ Fana, 29 Aug 2019

year;

6 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Financial Post*. **National Bank of Ethiopia** (central bank) governor **Yinager Dessie** says that **Ethiopia** will slowly liberalise its exchange rate regime within the next three years;

3 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Reuters*. The **Joint Council of Political Parties**, representing 107 opposition parties, threatens to boycott the general election in 2020 claiming the electoral law is biased;

3 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Financial Post*. Finance minister **Mohamed Maait** says the government is targeting a 7.2% budget deficit in the 2019/2020 fiscal year;

2 Sep 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Borkena*. The trade and industry ministry says that consumer inflation rose to 15% in August;

30 Aug 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Borkena*. State-run **Ethio Telecom** announces a three-year strategic plan to roll out 4G network capacity in **Addis Ababa** and other regions and to upgrade other network services;

27 Aug 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Fana*. Ethiopia electoral board grants the **Sidama** community a referendum on self-determination on 13 November;

26 Aug 2019 **Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)** *Xinhua*. **South Korea** signs a \$300m cooperation agreement with prime minister **Abiy Ahmed** during a state visit to South Korea;

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