

Rising Violence in Connection with Dam Constructions in the Northern Nile Valley

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Introduction

The construction of two large-scale hydropower dams in the northern Nile valley, Northern State, has led to protests and often violent clashes between local communities and security forces over the past three years. The more advanced project is the Merowe Dam, some 350 km north of Khartoum, which is due to be completed by 2009 and is one of the largest hydropower projects in Africa. The planning stage for another dam in the Kajbar area, some 650 km north of Khartoum, has been completed and construction is due to begin shortly. Both projects will result in the relocation of tens of thousands of people from the fertile Nile valley to other areas.

There are fears that violence may intensify in the coming months as the deadline for the relocation of thousands of residents from the Merowe area approaches and as construction is scheduled to begin in the Kajbar area where residents oppose the dam. Fundamental disagreements between the implementing government authorities and some local communities have not been resolved, leading to the radicalization of some community members and increasingly violent protests. In the latest escalation of violence in mid-June, four people were shot dead by security forces and others were injured when police violently dispersed a community protest. Some seven people reportedly remained detained by National Security without contact with the outside world at the time of writing. If disagreements between the authorities and the local communities are not resolved, the dam projects may result in further violence and human rights violations, as well as large-scale forced relocations.

Background on the Dam Projects

In the Merowe area, the dam construction requires the relocation of some 55,000 people belonging to three communities; the Manasir, Amri and Hamadab. The largest affected group is the Manasir community which represents 68 per cent of the affected population and remains to be relocated. The second largest group, the Amri community, represents 25 per cent of the affected population and about half of them have already been relocated to a newly constructed settlement in a desert area over 20 km from the river. Relocation of the Hamadab, who represent about seven per cent of the affected population, was completed in 2003. In the Kajbar area, an estimated 10,000 people are expected to be displaced as a consequence of the proposed dam construction; they belong to the Mahas, a Nubian community.

The total cost of the Merowe project is budgeted at 1.2 billion US Dollars. According to reports by observers, the principal funders of the project, in addition to the Sudanese government, are the China Export Import Bank, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, and the Development Funds of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, and the Sultanate of Oman. The project is executed by Chinese and European companies, including Harbin (China), Lahmeyer International (Germany), Alstom (France) and ABB (Switzerland). According to public information sources, the Kajbar dam is budgeted at 200 million US Dollars and will be funded by the Sudanese government (25%) and China (75%).

Construction of the dams is coordinated by the Dam Implementation Unit, a government agency which was previously part of the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, and in September 2005 became an independent agency directly answerable to the President. It is headed by Osama Abdallah, a former state minister and influential member of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP). As a technical implementation body, the Dam Implementation Unit has often taken key decisions without consulting, or informing affected communities. Its offices in the affected areas have repeatedly been targeted in violent protests by angry members of local communities, resulting in property damage.

Sources of Conflict

In the Merowe area, community members have expressed concern, among other things, about the unsuitability of some of the areas selected for their relocation, the lack of adequate sources of revenue and a lack of transparency in the planning and implementation process, particularly regarding allocation of housing and compensation for lost property. There have been limited consultations with community representatives which have not been effective in addressing these concerns. Previous relocations have resulted in large numbers of people being left temporarily without food, shelter and medical care.

As a result, part of the Amri community now refuses to move to a relocation site, even though the area is due to be flooded as of August 2007. In the Kajbar area, community representatives oppose the dam construction and are campaigning for an independent reassessment of the project. Both communities are highly mobilized and, as recent developments have highlighted (see below), violence may erupt if the authorities decide to press on with the projects. Security forces have repeatedly used live ammunition during the policing of protests, leading to killings and injuries. On several occasions, community representatives, journalists, lawyers and others have been detained. Security forces have recently stated publicly that some members of the local communities possess firearms.

Recent Violence in the Merowe and Kajbar Areas

Merowe Dam Area

In the Merowe area, opposition to the dam project by the local communities mounted after the relocation of the small community of the Hamadab in 2003 revealed unresolved problems. The government failed to fulfill its promises of providing adequate infrastructure and services in the relocation area, and failed to pay in full the compensations agreed for lost assets. The relocation areas were not suitable for agriculture and the irrigation system was not operational, leaving the agricultural community largely without revenue. These and other problems antagonized the local population. The government failed to address the concerns of the community effectively and has generally responded with repressive measures.

The Amri Community

In the Amri area, violent clashes with security forces occurred in April 2006 when the government conducted a long-delayed survey on requirements for the relocation, which was opposed by the community, amid heavy security force presence. Three civilians were killed and some 12 wounded after the army moved into the Amri area and opened fire on a large-scale community protest against the survey. Although the government set up a committee of investigation three days after the killings, the victims' families have received no information about its outcome and the perpetrators are not known to have been tried. Community representatives have complained about the fact that the survey was conducted in a non-transparent manner and that the criteria for awarding compensation were inadequate. As a consequence, large numbers of residents were not allocated housing or granted compensation for lost land, houses and trees.

In August 2006, the community was reportedly informed by a government official that they would have to start moving after only six days. The day after the announcement, the area began to flood with water from the Nile, reportedly forcing close to 3,000 households out of their homes in the following weeks. Community representatives expressed concern that the flooding occurred because a part of the dam

had been blocked intentionally to force the residents to move. Water flows were increasing as a consequence of heavy seasonal rainfall in Ethiopia, but there were reports that some 1,500 homes were flooded before these water flows reached the area. Thousands of residents were reportedly left without shelter, food and medical care as a consequence of the sudden flooding of the area.

Once the community was relocated to the resettlement area, flaws in the planning process became apparent, as some 800 families were reportedly not allocated housing and were forced to seek shelter with relatives. Some of them have apparently occupied unallocated houses in the relocation area. In addition, community representatives have complained about the poor soil quality and the ineffectiveness of the irrigation system. According to recent reports by community leaders, the housing allocation problems have yet to be addressed by the implementing authorities. Some 45 per cent of the Amri community remain on their original land and reportedly refuse to be relocated, although the area is expected to flood as of late August 2007.

The Manasir Community

The Manasir – the largest group among the affected communities – are also scheduled to be relocated at the end of 2007. Tension with the authorities rose in recent months after the authorities appeared to retract an earlier agreement that the Manasir could be relocated to an area on the shore of the dam reservoir, chosen by the vast majority of them, instead of the desert areas which had originally been designated by the authorities. Only a small minority of the community accepts to be relocated to the sites identified by the dam authorities. During a rally held in the town of Abu Hamad on 20 March 2007, some representatives of the community reportedly announced that they would take up arms against the government.

One week after the protests, armed police moved into the Manasir area to arrest those who had called for armed resistance. Members of the community reportedly surrounded several vehicles and dozens of police officers, and held them hostage for over 24 hours until a provisional settlement with the authorities in Khartoum was reached, in the evening of 27 March 2007. The community claims that they were armed with knives, axes, sticks and agricultural implements, but the authorities allege that the community also possesses firearms. There had been earlier reports that some disgruntled members of the Manasir joined the Eastern Front as *Harakat al-Muhajireen*.

On 29 March 2007, six representatives of the community, three of whom had been present at the rally in Abu Hamad, were arrested in Khartoum and detained by National Security in Kober prison for close to two months without charge. On 6 May, students belonging to the Manasir community organized a demonstration in Khartoum to protest against the detention of the six community representatives. The demonstration was reportedly dispersed by police using teargas and rubber bullets and several students were apparently detained for brief periods of time following the demonstration. The six

Manasir representatives were released without charge on 26 May after an agreement was reached with the authorities that the community would be offered the choice to relocate to the shore of the reservoir. UNMIS Human Rights has received no allegations of ill-treatment, but has yet to meet with the released detainees. The community has initiated a self-help project and, on 1 June 2007, began construction of two villages in the area chosen by them.

On 12 June, the authorities conducted a survey to assess how many community members prefer to relocate to the shore of the reservoir, and how many would relocate to the settlements which have already been constructed by the dam authorities. On 6 June, a group of Manasir supporting the relocation plan of the dam authorities clashed with community members opposing the plan. They were advocating relocation to the areas constructed by the dam authorities, apparently in an attempt to influence the outcome of the survey. Shots were fired during the clash, resulting in four people being injured. Police sources have announced that they discovered firearms held by the local community and a judicial investigation has been opened into the events. The survey reportedly concluded that more than two thirds of the Manasir community prefer to relocate to the shore of the reservoir.

Kajbar Dam Area

Tension has risen in the Kajbar area where a dam is due to be constructed between the hamlets of Kajbar on the western shore and Sabu on the eastern shore of the Nile. Local residents are opposing the dam construction and have mobilized large-scale protests against the start of construction work. Community leaders dispute the economic rationale for the dam project and demand that all construction is halted until a new, transparent assessment is made.

The latest violence was sparked in mid-June when private companies undertook preparatory work for the dam construction, apparently without consulting or informing the local community. Four civilians were killed and some 11 injured when security forces fired live rounds of ammunition into a crowd of protesters. The protests by the local community erupted on 13 June after private companies began taking soil samples and drilling holes in an area near the hamlet of Sabu, which has been designated for construction of the dam, but where the land is reportedly still owned by members of the local community. Angered by the fact that the community had neither been consulted nor informed by the authorities prior to the work being carried out, some 500 men and women set out on a protest march from the hamlet of Jeddi. They were planning to hand over a memorandum to an official of the implementing authorities in Sabu.

Some 7 km before reaching Sabu, the protesters were stopped at a narrow stretch in between hills and the river when some 40 security officers thought to belong to the Central Reserve Police fired tear gas at the crowd. According to eye-witnesses, the security forces, which were posted several hundred meters further along the way, started

firing live ammunition into the crowd after one officer blew a whistle from a hilltop. The crowd was dispersed and protesters fled back towards the village of Jeddi. According to reports by local residents, four men aged between 18 and 45 were killed after being hit by bullets in the head or chest. A further 11 people were reportedly injured by bullet wounds; two of them seriously.

In a statement carried by an international news agency on 14 June, police said they had fired live rounds in self defense after tear gas failed to prevent protesters attacking their positions. This contradicts reports by eye-witnesses who have stated that the demonstration was peaceful and that protesters were unarmed. According to these reports, the protesters were several hundred meters away from the security forces when the teargas was fired, and live ammunition was fired at the crowd indiscriminately and without warning. According to some reports, one of those killed had been followed by security officers and shot dead inside the village of Jeddi. Community representatives have also stated that police fired tear gas at boats crossing the river to prevent people living on the other shore of the river from joining the demonstration.

Immediately after the protests, the deputy governor of Northern State gave a statement to local media condemning the violent repression of the protests, and promising to halt construction work and to bring the perpetrators to justice. The following day, these announcements were retracted by the governor, who had been absent from the area at the time of the statement, and who announced that the dam construction would continue as scheduled. The deputy governor reportedly resigned from office in protest at the governor's unwillingness to address the concerns of the local community. On 19 June, the governor of Northern State announced on Sudanese television that an investigation committee would be set up to investigate the events during the protest. The general prosecutor of Northern State, who was appointed by the Minister of Justice to head the committee, has issued a public information ban on the work of the committee and the Kajbar incident, ostensibly to prevent interference with the course of justice.

In the wake of the protests, some 26 people were arrested by police and National Security in the Kajbar area and in Khartoum. Some seven of them were held by National Security without contact with the outside world at the time of writing. Among them are two lawyers and a local community leader who were arrested in Dongola, the capital of Northern State, in the late evening of 13 June after arriving in the area to investigate the events. Four journalists of national newspapers, who were arrested at the same time, were released without charge on 20 June. They had been held by National Security in Kober prison and were reportedly forced to sit on chairs during the night, depriving them of sleep. In Khartoum, two people, a journalist and a Mahas community leader, were arrested by National Security between 16 and 20 June and remained detained *incommunicado* at the time of writing.

Four residents of the Kajbar area, who were held for up to five days after the protests by police and National Security, have been released without charge. There were allegations of beatings during arrest and transfer to the place of detention. In Khartoum, three people were arrested by police during a spontaneous protest by members of the Mahas community on 14 June, which was dispersed by police using tear gas. They were held overnight, charged with public order offences, but acquitted on 19 June by a court in Khartoum for lack of evidence. On 15 June, a further five people were arrested in Haj Yusif, Northern Khartoum, by officers thought to belong to National Security while distributing information about the Kajbar events. They were held for four days at the State Security Bureau in central Khartoum and have been released pending trial on charges, brought by the prosecutor of state security, for alleged public order offences.

Tensions in the Kajbar area had been rising in the previous months. Two months before the June protests, in late April, two civilians had been injured by bullets during clashes with police seeking to disperse a large-scale popular protest against the dam (see: *Fear of escalating violence in Kajbar area* in Human Rights Unit Consolidated Weekly Report, CWR_05_07_03, 12-18 May 2007). A complaint lodged by community representatives against the police for shooting the two protesters has not been investigated, reportedly because police received orders from superiors not to do so.

After the April protests, community representatives sought in vain to meet with the dam authorities in Khartoum to present their concerns. A Chinese company deployed workers and machinery to the area and the authorities increased the presence of security forces in an apparent effort to press ahead with construction and protect workers and machinery from expected violent protests.

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