

Egypt's role in developing Africa: An eyewitness report from Cairo

by Thierry Lalevée

This article is the result of a 10-day trip to Egypt by Uwe Friesecke and Thierry Lalevée as part of the Club of Life's activities in Africa. They were able to meet with many government officials to present the ideas and proposals of the Club of Life, including discussions on the economic development of Africa, and gave interviews to the press.

Egyptians are among many developing-sector citizens who reflect a deep faith in the future and their ability to change present world economic conditions, a cultural optimism rarely shared any more in the West where the present world depression is widely accepted as inexorable fate. In part, this outlook arises from Egypt's heritage—more than 10,000 years of history in which the country overcame repeated crises and developed further. "Egyptians today are like the Americans still used to be some 30 years ago," commented an official. "They want to think big, they want development."

In visiting Egypt for a second time in a year, it was clear that the set of national priorities seen in a first trip had not fundamentally changed, but has perhaps become more defined. The cornerstone of such priorities is that, for the first time in more than three decades, Egypt has been at peace for five or six years with its immediate neighbors. No one in Egypt can contest the beneficial effects of peace—witness the many development projects which were begun in the 1950s and were all abruptly stopped by 1967.

With Egypt's own economic development at the center of concern, it is widely understood that international steps have to be taken to meet this goal. This includes upgrading relations with the United States and the Western world in general, upgrading Egypt's activity within the Non-aligned Movement, and specifically upgrading Egypt's role in Africa. Egypt's role in the Middle East is low-key for obvious reasons. Often the same hypocritical Arab countries which denounce Egypt for its peace treaty with Israel do not hesitate to call on Egyptian technical know-how or even its intelligence capacities to defuse the threat of Iranian Islamic fanaticism. It is acknowledged that without Egyptian military

help, Iraq would have long since collapsed in its war against Khomeini.

Disillusionment with the West

Like many other developing countries, Cairo's dealings with the Western world are far from harmonious, even though—or perhaps because—Egypt is supposed to be one of the main U.S. allies in the region, a situation which is fundamentally more psychological than operational. There is no doubt that Egypt will never again link up with Moscow; as many officials commented, they have had close enough dealings with the Soviets in the past to know the way the Soviets deal with "colonies."

Egypt has made peace with itself and its history, and this means that it will never again accept being the vassal of anyone, either of the West, of the East, or of a foreign-dominated Islamic fanaticism. Relations with the United States are particularly strained on the economic front. Decisions like Eximbank's recent withdrawal of financing for Egypt's first nuclear plant, being built by Westinghouse near Alexandria, have not helped. Moreover, Egypt doesn't get even a tenth of the foreign economic aid its "partner in peace" Israel receives, not to mention the difference in quality in military aid. Although these differences could be grounds for complaints, Egyptians would not really mind—they have their own goals. But they certainly will not accept interference into their affairs; that was made clear during President Mubarak's latest trip to the United States, the occasion chosen by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to lash Egyptian-Romanian relations, hinting that Cairo could not be considered "reliable." A set of editorials in the Egyptian press quickly requested that the American media mind their own business.

"South-South relations" are increasing with other developing countries, especially in Latin America and obviously Africa. The consensus is that bilateral relations with the Western world will continue, but that "North-South" dialogue as such is dead. It is a dramatic assessment, one which

reflects a frequent misunderstanding in the developing sector of the depth of the economic and cultural depression in the West. The full scope of the crisis is not appreciated, nor is it adequately realized that without a global change, even South-South cooperation will become impossible.

Egypt's regional role

If there is one major complaint which is well founded, it is that Egypt's real role is being underestimated. It is at the crossroads between two major continents, Africa and Asia. At the same time it is the gateway linking the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, Europe, and the Atlantic. But this has been taken into consideration thus far only in geopolitical military terms, and not as an essential channel for fostering world economic development. As Egyptians are quick to realize, any major infrastructural projects in Asia from the subcontinent to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Basin will immediately create new demands on the Red Sea/Suez canal waterways. Increased trade in these regions will lead to bottlenecks in the Middle East and necessitate greater port and other infrastructure. These factors as well as the immediate African situation mean that the Egypt-Sudan region has to become a focal point in world development.

A glance at a map shows that Egyptian-Sudanese integration in joint development projects not only would have immediate effects on East Africa, but would affect such central African countries as Central Africa, Chad, Zaire, Uganda, and Kenya. Sudan, with its 200 million acres of potentially fertile land, can become Africa's breadbasket, but that requires an international effort. To date, only 18 million acres are cultivated. Unlike Egypt, Sudan has plenty of water from the Nile and regular rainfall, but it is often wasted in hundreds of kilometers of swamps. With Egyptian and international cooperation, a canal is being built in the southeastern part of Sudan which would link two parts of the Nile directly, avoiding the swamps. The canal will allow the irrigation of hundreds of thousands of acres of new fertile land and get rid of the swamps, despite the international campaign organized by Prince Philip's World Wildlife Fund in defense of mosquitos and other swamp life. Complementary projects are planned in Southern Sudan and in Ethiopia to control the Nile.

But to carry out such projects basic infrastructural work must be done to open Sudan to the rest of the continent: both an East-West cross-continent motorway and railway system, and a North-South motorway which would at least link Alexandria to Khartoum.

Egypt's own challenge

Sudan's recent steps toward full Islamization may yet create a new crisis which will dangerously postpone any such projects, as it threatens Egypto-Sudanese integration and sows the seeds of severe unrest in the southern Sudanese Christian regions, traditionally the targets of Libyan operations. An unstable Sudan is an immediate threat to Egypt, which faces

its own problems, as *EIR* has documented in a series of articles in December 1982 and January 1983.

Egyptians want to think big, though at present Egypt is small, with only 4 percent of its territory either inhabited or cultivated; 96 percent has yet to be conquered for mankind. A major step in that direction was the Aswan High Dam, completed by the mid-1960s. Those who scream today about the dam's side-effects on the Nile river and the crops because fertile sediments are removed, forget a simple fact. The Aswan Dam was not originally designed as a high technology project to stand in the middle of a desert with no major infrastructure around. In fact, projects for industrial centers were planned, just as remedies for the sediment problem were planned. But pressures from the International Monetary Fund and the June 1967 war dealt these projects a death blow. For more than 15 years everything was halted in favor of the security and war efforts.

As the Aswan Dam was the major project of the 1950s and 1960s, the key project for the coming two decades has to be a new Nile River linking up southern Egypt from the Aswan region or above up to the Mediterranean via the Egyptian Western Desert, flooding the Qattara Depression with fresh water. As studies have shown, it does not matter what kind of soil the Western Desert has, for once the water starts to flow, the soil will change rapidly. This has been proven by the various development projects in the Eastern desert between the Nile and the Red Sea, where in the space of two years entire desert areas have been transformed into highly productive arable land producing more than three or four crops a year. Such a project is Saheliyya where *EIR's* correspondents visited last December, but many others are in process. Before a second Nile can be created, these projects, however small, may double Egypt's usable land in 10 to 15 years, a crucial step as new cities must also be built for the 70 million Egyptians expected by the year 2000!

Egypt's role in African development

Egyptian technicians have achieved great expertise in these projects. Methods originally used in the American "Imperial Valley" have been imported and successfully implemented in the Egyptian desert. Egypt is in a position to train thousands of experts not only in the Sudan but all over Africa. Already, Egyptian technical help can be found in many countries in Western and Central Africa both in agriculture and industry. Indeed, Cairo may be diplomatically shunned by the postures of the Middle East, but it represents one of the major international centers of Africa. So far such help has remained bilateral, and now more than ever there is a need for greater regional cooperation. For example in the Sahara, all the countries involved in the fight against the desert need to close ranks and share experience. Only in such a context with Asia and Latin America will South-South cooperation be a success. This challenge is already emerging; the Western countries will be judged by their ability to meet it.