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## Africa drying up

Wednesday, 13th December, 2006

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By Vision Reporter

Africa has experienced a significant drying in the past three years, new satellite data have revealed.

The water levels all over the continent are going down at an unprecedented pace, BBC reported.

The total volume of water lost in Africa amounts to 334 cubic km, which is almost as much as all Africans have consumed over the same period.

The Nile basin was identified as an area of particular concern, along with the Congo and Zambezi basins.

The new data, which were disclosed at an international conference in San Francisco, US, come from Nasa spacecraft. Using satellites, it can detect changes in gravity caused by water as it cycles between the sea, the atmosphere and the land.

Apart from climate changes, human factors are blamed for the reduction of water levels. These include lack of reservoir management, irrigation and hydro-electric power generation as well as wetland drainage and river diversion projects.

"There are natural climate variations, the natural ups and downs," professor Jay Famiglietti from the University of California-Irvine told BBC.

"Another big factor is human control of the water cycle (through) reservoir management, the storage of water on continents.

"Groundwater mining leads to heavy depletion of water. Wetland drainage, river diversion projects - all of those factors contribute to these storage variations that we see. We'll be working on trying to sort those out over the next few years," he said.

The African basins that show significant drying include those of the Congo, Zambezi and the Nile rivers. The Congo's decrease was equivalent to 260 cu km (about 60 trillion gallons) of water, and was almost certainly the result of reservoirs being let down. It was a consequence of human management of water resources.

In an effort to save the water of the Nile and use it in a rational way, the ten Nile Basin countries are finalising a new cooperation agreement, which is expected to be signed in Cairo early next year.

The new agreement would replace the former pacts of 1929 and 1959, which gave Egypt and Sudan extensive rights over the river's use. The latter also gave Egypt a de facto right to veto any project using Nile water in other riparian states.

"We are in the final stage of the negotiations on the future cooperation of the Nile Basin countries. There is a sincere will of all member-states to conclude this agreement," the Ambassador of Egypt, Reda Bebars, told The New Vision.

"At the moment only 5% of the Nile water is being used. The rest is getting lost, mainly through evaporation.

"The problem is, therefore, not so much the amount of water but how to use the water in a rational way, how to save water and how to create new sources."

He cited the Jonglei canal in Sudan, which will save billions of cubic meters, as an example. "The agreement will include all future projects concerning the Nile. We are very keen on having this agreement. For Egypt, water is life. The Nile is life," the ambassador added.



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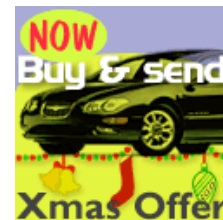
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