

Gibe III won't affect Kenya: Ambassador



ADDIS ABABA: Gibe III Hydro power project, which is expected to generate 1870 MW upon completion, is among the mega projects launched by the government to meet its own as well as neighboring country's demand for electricity energy. But some environmentalists and lobbyist groups' campaign against the project saying it will reduce the volume of Omo River which is a tributary to Lake Turkana and consequently affect the local people in Kenya.

Kenyan Ambassador to Ethiopia Dr. Monica Juma, who visited the project site recently, told Ethiopian Press Agency reporters here Tuesday: "The issue of Turkana is much greater than the Omo River. It has to do with the ecology, climate change, land use and volumes of water as well as rain and so forth. Besides, Omo is not the only water resource that feeds Lake Turkana."

The Ambassador said that Lake Turkana is not only Kenyan affair but is also an Ethiopian issue. "Given the ecology, it is important for us to understand what really is making the Lake Turkana shrink and the question is what we should do in order to reconstitute the lake," Dr. Juma said.

She said: "This is one of the regions both in the southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya that is least developed and very fragile. The debate has to be to on what we must do with this region that has been impacted so negatively by a range of factors," she said.

“We need to respond to the need of our people. We have to find the way of catapulting this area into modern face of development. The people on the Omo basin and Lake Turkana deserve good value of life, development and we have the obligation to cooperate in the way that provides improved living standards of these areas, the Ambassador said.

According to the ambassador, the region is where foreign tourists are coming in frequently and some people want to retain some of these places to make documentation to show the way of life people lead as others lived many centuries ago. “I think, we have to deal with this.”

“Unless Gibe III, he/she would not understand that it is impossible to undertake irrigation on that river because of the area’s typography, the ambassador said. She also said that hydroelectric projects also by their nature do not affect the flow of waters.

The ambassador said: “Kenya eyes the development and the degree of transferability of this project because we are also quite interested in the development of clean energy and hydroelectric power. Gibe III project has greater significance to Kenya as it is one of the world source of energy.”

Ambassador Juma also expressed conviction the two countries will design mutually acceptable frameworks to address bigger challenges than the issue of Gibe III.

Water and Energy Minister Alemayehu Tegenu said that the Ethiopian government has conducted Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) on the project as required by national and international environmental regulatory frameworks prior to its launch recruiting independent international experts.

“All studies indicate the fact that the project has greater importance not only to Ethiopia but Kenya as well. Its negative impact is very minimal compared to any hydroelectric plant in the world.”

The governments of Ethiopia and Kenya are well aware of the motives of those individuals and groups who are opposing the project without having any concrete evidence or scientific studies.

“The motives of those who called themselves environmentalists are clear – they want to use the opportunity to generate personal gains. They don’t care about the people or the environment at all,” he said.

“All of those organizations and individuals have echoed of similar opposition distorting facts on the ground and footing their arguments on hearsay which are not supported by and scientific study,” the Minister said.

It is clearly stated in the ESIA that people in the upstream and downstream will greatly benefit from Gibe III, Alemayehu said, and indicated the project spurs socio-economic development in both areas.

Regarding Lake Turkana, the Minister said that the shrinking of Lake Turkana's water level has nothing to do with the construction of Gibe III. " we did not stop the flow of Omo River or use a drop of water at this particular time but the water level of Lake Turkana is dropping. This clearly proves that Gibe III won't pose any damage to the Lake. The decline in the volume of water has nothing to do with Gibe III rather the problem is linked with climate change and frequent drought crisis," he said.

Hydrological assessment conducted by an independent consultant (Dr. Sean Avery) hired by African Development Bank Group indicates that the level of Lake Turkana is fluctuating up to 1.5 meter prior to the materialization of Gibe III Dam and this is due to the fluctuation in the inflow during dry and wet seasons. The maximum fluctuation on the Lake Turkana water level would be limited to 0.6 m after the construction of the Gibe III Dam.

Another independent study undertaken by Studio Peitrageli also shows that the water level of Lake Turkana has dropped constantly during the last decades. This drop was significant between 1972 and 1988 during which the water level dropped about 4 meters. This indicates that there is a long term change in the watershed and rainfall pattern of Lake Catchment.

This study has analyzed in detail the effects on Lake Turkana water level during the first impounding of Gibe III reservoir and the possible impacts during plant operation. The results of the assessments show that the fluctuation would be reduced to 0.18 m from that of prior to Gibe III dam construction which is 0.76 m reduction in the Lake Turkana water level during dry years.