

# Safe waters

Reports of villages being inundated along the Nile banks have raised public concern over the highest flood level for 60 years. But is there anything to really worry about, asks [Reem Leila](#)

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Water levels behind the High Dam have risen by between eight and 11 centimetres per day during the flood season. Lake Nasser has reached 181.57 metres, and there is a possibility it could rise even higher to 182 metres. Fed by higher than average rainfall in Ethiopia from August to September, it is the most substantial flood since 1946, though officials say the rising waters pose no threat. Lake Nasser can hold up to 162 billion cubic metres of water while the Toshka depression can absorb a further 90-120 billion cubic metres.

At the peak of the flood season, Lake Nasser was receiving up to 750 million cubic metres of water a day. While this figure is now decreasing, inflows are expected to continue until December. The total volume of water behind the dam currently stands at 153.91 billion cubic metres.

The River Nile daily receives 250 million cubic metres, a figure that can be increased to 350 million cubic metres in exceptional circumstances. This year's high flood could be used to help flush the Nile which, says Helmi Tawfiq Al-Zonfolly of the National Research Centre, has become increasingly contaminated with pollutants. "Since the construction of the High Dam, the amount of flushed water has dropped and it is not enough to clear the river's course," he says.

Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources (MIWR) spokesman Hussein El-Atfi said earlier this week that the level of Lake Nasser could well exceed 182 metres. The MIWR has already ordered dam gates to be opened to allow excess water to be diverted along the spillway to the Toshka depression as well as four other depressions to the east and west of the lake.

"The Toshka spillway was designed to be opened when the water level in Lake Nasser reaches 178 metres. We have already diverted 660 million cubic metres of water to the Toshka depression and another 440 million cubic metres into the other four depressions. It is possible to flush one billion cubic metres a day when the High Dam's 30 gates and the Toshka depression are open, so the rising waters represent no threat," said El-Atfi. He confirmed that the Minister of Irrigation Mahmoud Abu Zeid had placed municipal and rural authorities around Aswan, as well as the ministry's own affiliate bodies, on a state of alert, and pointed out that cooperation between the Egyptian and Sudanese ministries of irrigation continues throughout the rainy season in order to successfully manage the flood.

An MIWR press release reiterated that the rising waters pose no danger to the High Dam, to adjacent urban development or to ancient monuments. What flooding has damaged has been restricted to illegal shanty settlements built on islands in the river or along the Nile's banks.

Karam Saber, head of the Land Centre for Human Rights (LCHR), argues that the inhabitants of these illegal communities should have been found alternative housing, "Instead they, and the surrounding cultivated land, have been neglected." It is evidence, he said, of the government's seeming inability to plan for emergencies.

The flood occurred at a time when the level of Lake Nasser was already low -- at the beginning of the season it stood at 174.64 metres -- which helped in absorbing this year's intake of flood waters, says Hussein Elwan, head of MIWR's Central Directorate for Water Distribution.

"Initially we directed excess water to Toshka, though as the water continued to rise we had to discharge it into four other depressions in order to maintain a safe level of water," says Elwan. While MIWR experts do not anticipate significant further increases Elwan says contingency plans are in place to deal with any emergencies that might arise. "The water level can be predicted up to 11 days in advance which provides sufficient time to make plans for the incoming water. We are making every effort to monitor rainfall and are working closely with officials in the Nile Basin countries," says Elwan.

Before the construction of the High Dam, the annual flood would inundate fields and villages close to the banks of the river and in an average year 32 billion cubic metres of water would be washed into the Mediterranean via the Nile's branches in the Delta. The old Aswan dam had a maximum capacity of less than five billion cubic metres, less than a sixth of the total water flowing through the Nile during the flood season.

"The High Dam protects Egypt from the danger of flooding in particular during rainy seasons and provides a reservoir of water to be used in lean years," says Elwan.