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The Rhine Split in Two From Drought

The Nile's 2026 Outlook Warns Sudan Will Take
the Hit



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The Rhine Just Split in Two From Drought. The Nile's Own 2026 Outlook Says Sudan and Egypt Will Take



the Hit.

A record Rhine drought is straining Europe's wealthiest logistics network. The Nile Basin's own 2026 outlook says Sudan and Egypt will bear the worst of this year's hydrological stress.

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On 14 August 2026, the Rhine fell below 10 centimetres at Kaub, the shallowest choke point on Germany's busiest inland waterway — a record low that has, in practical terms, split Europe's most important barge river in two (attaqa.net, 18 August 2026, citing S&P Global). Barges can still reach Cologne and the lower Rhine. South of there, only a handful of specially built light vessels can move at all. Shipping rates from the Amsterdam-Rotterdam-Antwerp hub to Basel hit €276.67 a tonne on 14 August — up from €35 a tonne on 3 June (Spotbarge data via attaqa.net, 18 August 2026). Four regions in eastern France have reported car-fuel shortages. Germany suspended its Sunday truck-driving ban on 16 August just to keep deliveries moving, even though a single freight train still carries what would otherwise take 52 trucks (Deutsche Bahn estimate, via attaqa.net). ING has warned the water level could shave 0.3 percentage points off German GDP this year.

This is happening to one of the richest, most heavily engineered rivers on Earth, in a region that has spent seven years and billions of euros adapting to the last Rhine drought, in 2018. It is still not enough.

Now look at the Nile. In June 2026, the Nile Basin Initiative — the ten-country body that coordinates hydrological monitoring across the basin — published its official outlook for the June-to-September rainy season, the period that supplies most of the river's annual flow. The report's own words: “downstream countries — particularly Sudan and Egypt — will bear the greatest cumulative risk from upstream hydrological deficits.” Conditions this year, it says, “closely resemble” the strong El Niño drought years of 1997 and 2023.

The Argument

First, the two rivers are not failing the same way — and the Nile's version is harder to engineer for. The Rhine's problem is a single, slow-moving trend: less water, more often, for longer. Europe can plan around that, however imperfectly — heavier-draft-tolerant barges, rail capacity, storage buffers. Sudan's 2026 outlook is not a single trend. The Nile Basin Initiative forecasts below-normal-to-near-normal seasonal rainfall for Sudan overall, with upstream probabilities of below-normal conditions exceeding 60 percent and peaking near 80 percent in parts of the Ethiopian highlands that feed the Blue Nile — while simultaneously warning of continued risk of “short-duration high flows” and localized flash flooding in Sudan's own most vulnerable catchments: Blue Nile state, Kassala, Gedaref, Sennar, and Khartoum. Sudan has to design infrastructure against drought and flood risk at the same time, in the same season. That is a genuinely harder problem than the one Germany is currently failing to fully solve with a functioning state, a national rail operator, and access to capital markets.



Second, Sudan's version of “resilience” is being asked to run through infrastructure the war has already gutted.

The Nile Basin outlook names Merowe Dam specifically among the hydropower assets at risk from this year's flow conditions — Sudan's largest, and one of the only sources of grid electricity that survived the conflict's early damage relatively intact. Independent reporting has put the war's toll on Sudan's overall energy-generation capacity at up to 40 percent lost since April 2023 (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, cited in The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 23 February 2026). A below-normal Blue Nile flow squeezing Merowe's output this year is not landing on a healthy grid with spare capacity to absorb the loss — it is landing on a grid that has already lost nearly half its national supply.

Third, Sudan doesn't have Europe's warning time, and last year proved it. Part of what let Germany suspend a truck-driving ban and reroute freight, however imperfectly, is that European agencies tracked the Rhine's decline for weeks and published daily forecasts from national hydrological services. Sudan's most damaging flood event of 2025 arrived with almost no warning at all: in September, Ethiopia released water from the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam without notifying Sudan or Egypt, and villages along the Blue Nile — including Ad-Damazin and Ar-Roseires — flooded before residents had any notice (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 23 February 2026, citing Atar Network reporting). Khartoum's own flood warning that month came only after villages in al-Jazirah state had already gone under water. The Nile Basin Initiative's own recommendation for this season is “transboundary hydrometeorological data and information sharing and real-time information exchange among Nile Basin countries” — which is a polite, technical way of describing the exact gap that failed Sudan seven weeks ago as recently as last September.

Why It Matters to the Reader

If you fund or design Sudan's energy and water reconstruction, the lesson from this year's Rhine crisis is not “climate risk is bad” — everyone already knows that. It is that even a wealthy, stable, single-trend drought is proving barely manageable for one of the best-resourced river systems on the planet. Sudan is being asked to manage a harder, bimodal version of the same problem — drought risk and flash-flood risk in the same season, on the same catchments — with a war-damaged grid, a still-forming reconstruction pipeline, and, as of last September, no reliable advance warning when upstream neighbours move water. Any donor-funded rebuild of Merowe's transmission network, any new mini-grid or irrigation scheme financed for the Blue Nile, Gedaref, or Kassala corridor, and any diplomatic push around Nile Basin cooperation should treat access to real-time hydrological data — not just physical infrastructure — as core reconstruction spending, not an afterthought bolted on later. The Sudan-specific early-warning tools the Nile Basin Initiative references by name (Sudan-IBF, Sudan-FFEWS) exist; the open question is whether Sudan's institutions have the staffing, power supply, and international backing to actually run them through a war.



Close

Germany has rail lines, a national government, and billions of euros, and the Rhine is still costing it a slice of GDP growth this year. Sudan has neither the redundancy nor the warning systems Europe is currently leaning on — and the Nile Basin's own scientists say Sudan and Egypt will absorb the worst of whatever this season brings. The blueprints for Sudan's post-war grid and irrigation systems are still being drawn. This is the year to build the whiplash — not just the drought, and not just the flood — into them.

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