

Battle for the Mekong heats up

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Forwarded by Nguyễn Thế Anh JJR 56



Laos's Xayaburi dam project faces opposition throughout the region over its ecological impact.

The Mekong, a precious jewel of Southeast Asia, has become a critical battleground between hydropower dam projects and the survival of the world's greatest freshwater fisheries. The future of this 4,880 km (3032 miles) long river may well be decided by what happens to the Xayaburi mega-dam project in Laos, the first of a cascade of 11 dam projects on the lower Mekong.

Ame Trandem from the NGO International Rivers explained that, "The Mekong River is the lifeblood of Southeast Asia, feeding and employing millions of people. To move forward with the Xayaburi Dam would be reckless and irresponsible, as the dam would fatally impact the river's ecosystem and fisheries."

In spite of repeated reports that the Xayaburi dam project had been suspended pending further scientific studies, a recent visit to the dam-site has suggested that the Lao government has not bowed to international pressure. As a World Wildlife Fund analysis recently warned, "Construction work is marching ahead at the Xayaburi dam site in northern Laos and risks making a mockery of the decision last December by Mekong countries to delay building the dam on the Mekong mainstream."



In December 2011 the four-member nations of the Mekong River Commission – Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam – agreed that no dams should be built until further scientific

studies of the negative impacts on all the riparian countries had been completed.

Scientists have warned that if the 11 dams are built it could bring on an ecological disaster that harms many of the 877 Mekong fish species. Furthermore, it is the uninhibited flow of the Mekong through the heart of Southeast Asia and the river's bountiful natural resources that guarantees 65 million people's food security.

Although Cambodia and Vietnam are determined to stop the dam, everything indicates that the Thai developer Ch. Karnchang and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) are equally determined to build it. In this context, a failure to resolve the dam issue could also trigger a major diplomatic row among the Mekong nations, undermining the credibility of the MRC and disrupting international cooperation along the region's most important waterway.

"The Xayaburi Dam will trigger an ecological crisis of tremendous proportions. We urge the Prime Ministers of Laos and Thailand to show leadership by cancelling this project," Shalmali Guttal of Focus on the Global South, a member of the 263 coalition of NGOs from 51 nations said in a statement condemning the dam.

In response to this opposition, Lao Foreign Minister, Thongloun Sisoulith made announced during last month's ASEAN FM summit that his country was suspending work on the Xayaburi dam until further studies on its impact could be done. Although opponents of the dam welcomed Vientiane's announcement, they soon were disappointed.

Soon after the Lao government's announcements, a number of diplomats, MRC officials, experts, and donors visited Laos to see the site. After the visit some MRC observers then asserted that, "the project is in an advanced preparation stage with exploratory excavation in and around the river completed." Similarly, International Rivers concluded in their own unofficial investigation of the dam-site in June, that, "the dredging and widening of river has already taken place."

Meanwhile back in Bangkok, Ch.Karnchang, the Thai developer of the US\$3.8 billion project, said the dam was going ahead with no delays in the original timetable. Initial construction has evidently started, however. Has the Laotian government then reneged on its international commitments?

Deputy Minister for Energy and Mines Viraphonh Viravonghas denied any violation of the MRC agreements. Instead he contended that all the construction done so far falls under the rubric of "preparatory work," noting that the construction "does not involve permanent structures" and instead is mostly about building makeshift housing for construction workers. But fisheries experts say that long before the river is fully blocked, existing construction will disturb the riverbed enough to significantly affect fish populations and the flow of sediments downstream. Dr. Jian-hua Meng, a sustainable hydropower specialist working at the WWF, argues that, "This will be the first direct intervention in the riverbed, and will mark a milestone in the ongoing dam construction."

According to a WWF report, which was strongly critical of the Dam project, Viraphonh Viravong, Laos's Deputy Minister of Energy and Mines, contradicted the foreign minister when he allegedly told the MRC-led delegation that the project would proceed without further reviews.

Since September 2010 ongoing consultations based on the MRC regulatory framework has resulted in the Lao government trying to answer the strong objections from Cambodia and Vietnam. Unsatisfied, Vietnam has called for a 10-year moratorium on dam construction. To answer these objections Laos appointed two foreign consultants: the Swiss-based Poyry Energy and French company CNR (Compagnie Nationale du Rhone). Still, Cambodia and Vietnam remain convinced that any dam will block fish migration and reduce the flow of sediment.

Both foreign consultants argue that fish ladders or fish passes can enable 85% of all fish to get past the turbines and successfully swim up or down river but this claim has not been fully tested. Indeed, many dismissed Poyry's previous report – a compliance review of the Xayaburi Dam in 2011 regarding the consultation process with its neighbors- as lacking the necessarily scientific data. It's also worth noting that the Finnish-based Poyry has been blacklisted by the World Bank for unrelated corruption charges that have led the CEO to resign. This calls into question its credibility.

Very different advice to the Lao government came from the visiting U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who said last month that, "I'll be very honest with you; We made a lot of mistakes.... We've learned some hard lessons about what happens when you make certain infrastructure decisions, and I think that we all can contribute to helping the nations of the Mekong region avoid the mistakes that we and others made."

Washington is also concerned that if the Xayaburi dam goes ahead, China is lined up to build at least three more dams further down the Mekong thus penetrating ever deeper into the Mekong sub-region.

NGOs representing people from the eight provinces in northeast Thailand are about to file legal action in the courts to force the Thai government to review the contract with the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), the state's electricity body. Thailand has agreed to buy 95% of all the power generated from the Xayaburi dam.

The Thai government has quietly endorsed the MRC consensus that further scientific study is needed. Now NGOs are demanding that the Thai government do more and use its power to freeze the Xayaburi/EGAT contract, which in turn would pressure the Thai dam-builder Karnchang to halt the project.

According to scientists the stakes are high in this ongoing battle over sustainable development. WWF's Dr. Jian-hua Meng has warned, for instance, that "Resting the future of the Mekong on flawed analysis and gaps in critical data could have dire consequences for the livelihoods of millions of people living in the Mekong river basin."

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