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# The Mekong under Threat

*Environmentalists call for urgent moratorium by heads of governments surrounding the river*

*Goodbye Khone Falls*

Nineteen local, regional and international environmental groups under an umbrella called Save the Mekong are calling for an urgent moratorium on plans by the Laotian government to build a new hydroelectric dam which they fear will do irreparable damage to the giant river's ecosystem.

The Laos government says it expects to start construction of the Don Sahong dam this month near the picturesque Khone Falls, with commercial operation of its 260 MW of power to begin in 2018.

One of the world's most impoverished countries, Laos has a wealth of natural resources that it is anxious to exploit in a drive to build a more sophisticated economy. With annual per capita gross domestic product a minuscule US\$3,100 per year by purchasing power parity, it ranks 176<sup>th</sup> in the world. The government in Vientiane nonetheless hopes energy sales, mostly to Thailand and China, can put it on the way to lower middle income status and provide jobs outside of agriculture, which currently accounts for 75 percent of employment.



However, the dam, the environmentalists said, "will irreversibly alter the Khone Falls and Mekong River basin. It will create a non-passable barrier across the Hou Sahong channel, recognized by fishery experts as one of the worst possible sites to build a dam, as it is the passage of maximum fish migration on the Mekong, which supports the world's largest inland fisheries."

The Laotian government appears ready to ignore a 1995 agreement that mainstream Mekong projects can only proceed if a consensus is reached between MRC's four member countries – Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The riparian countries are growing increasingly alarmed at Laos's plans, which could threaten to restrict the flow of sediment to Vietnam's rice fields and block the pathway of migrating fish, which feed millions in the Lower Mekong. Vietnam, Cambodia and seven Thai provincial governments have already objected to the construction of another dam, the Xayaburi deep inside the mountains of northern Laos on the lower Mekong, to no avail. While the Laotian government has repeatedly paid lip service to calls for moratoriums, it has continued construction work.

Environmental groups including the World Wildlife Fund like WWF have also warned for the possible impact on Mekong's unique biodiversity, second in scope only to the Amazon's. Additionally, according to Save the Mekong, more than two million cubic meters of riverbed will be excavated from the Mekong River to increase flows into the Hou Sahong channel.

The Don Sahong, the group said, will have "serious negative repercussions on fisheries and local livelihoods, as well as the food security of millions of people within the Lao PDR and in the neighboring countries of Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. The project will also threaten such rare and

internationally recognized giant migratory fishes as *Pangasius krempfi*, *Pangasianodon gigas*, *Probarbus jullieni*, and *Probarbus labeamajor*.”

The group said it has little faith in the Mekong River Commission or the ability of the 1995 Mekong Agreement to adequately address the threat. One clear indication, it said, is the MRC’s failure to resolve disagreement among the four member governments over whether the ‘prior consultation’ process for the Xayaburi Dam remains open or closed.

While the Laotian government has claimed that the Don Sahong Dam is “not on the Mekong mainstream,” , the group said, “we totally reject this claim, for there is absolutely no question that the Don Sahong Dam is a mainstream project that will deeply impact flows and fish migration, and have immense transboundary implications. For these reasons, we believe that the MRC will once again fail, should resolution of the Don Sahong Dam controversy remain solely in the hands of the Lao government.”

The Vietnam Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, the former Cambodian Minister of Environment, and members of the Thailand National Mekong River Committee have all objected to further damming of the Mekong.

“In light of the many ambiguities around the Don Sahong Dam, as well as other projects on the Mekong mainstream, deliberations over all these projects must be halted,” Save the Mekong said. “A new joint platform is urgently needed to review, clarify, and resolve outstanding issues through regional-level decision-making based on the principles of transparency and full participation of all stakeholders. Necessary studies, including transboundary impact assessments for all projects, must also be carried out in order to allow for informed decision-making.”

