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VOICES FROM MEKONG

Dams upriver hurting people living downstream

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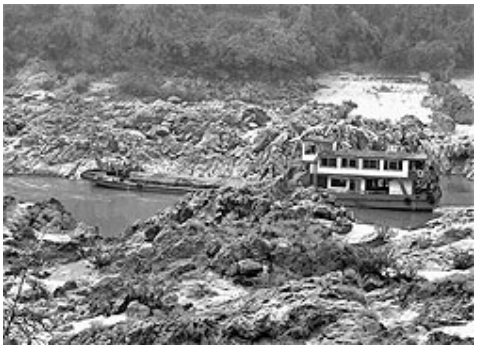
When 42-year-old Zhang Chun Shan, a Chinese farmer-cum-activist, told a public forum in Bangkok this week that he was unaware of the negative impact his great nation's hydropower projects have caused to neighbouring countries downstream, a hundred participants understood him.



A cargo ship struggles to negotiate the Mekong River in Chiang Rai in April last year, where water levels had dropped considerably due to China's damming of the river further north. At other times, such as August this year, water released by the dams in China during periods of heavy rainfall have contributed to flooding in riverine communities.

"I feel sorry for you; the downstream communities have problems with their fisheries and floods [after the dam construction] but we upstream people face the problems of soil erosion and villagers' relocation," said Mr Zhang, director of Lijiang City Environmental Volunteer Organisation.

The forum, entitled "Mekong Mainstream Dams: Voices Across Borders" was held last week at Chulalongkorn University.

How could the Chinese people know of the suffering of people in other countries? They do not even know about the hardships of their compatriots. "Because the local and central governments never tell anyone how we - communities affected by dams - are suffering," mourned Mr Zhang, who comes from Yunnan province.

Niwat Roykeow, a former headmaster of Chiang Khong School in Chiang Rai province, accused the Chinese dams - Manwan, Dachaoshan and Jinghong - of causing the heaviest floods in Chiang Saen in four decades last August.

"At least three districts have yet to recoup the financial loss of 85 million baht, not to mention the heartbreak of being fooled by authorities that dams help prevent flooding, serve agriculture and produce electricity," said the 47-year-old Niwat.

He called on China to take responsibility for the suffering of the downstream people and urged the lower-Mekong governments to be more collaborative with their own people in seeking compensation from the upstream nation.

China expert Vorasakdi Mahatdhanobol from Chulalongkorn University said that if China wants to rise gracefully and in a sustainable manner, Beijing needs to conduct an impartial study of its dams' impact on the riparian countries and release it publicly.

But the Mekong River Commission's (MRC) chief executive officer Jeremy Bird argued that the MRC's own study showed that the Chinese dams did not contribute to the flood; it was a natural event.

Montha Achariyakul, a community organiser in Bo Keo, Pongsali and Luang Prabang in Laos, said the Lao people did not believe rainfall was the cause.

"Headmen in northern Lao provinces warned their villagers that China would release more water from their dams. Despite the alert, a thousand households and their rice and corn fields were damaged," said Ms Montha.

Montree Chantawong, from Thai People's Network for Mekong, added that the MRC River Monitoring website still showed a "green sign" for Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong during the week of August 11-14 even though the area was inundated at that time.

The two-day seminar was not meant to talk about the already-built dams or to point the finger at any particular agency, but to raise awareness and plead for policy-makers at all levels, national and regional, and among international organisations as well as the private sector, to pay more attention to the voices of the people living along the river.

Participants were trying to forge a more concrete solidarity in order to hold future projects accountable to the people. Those projects are now at their doorstep.

Over the next few years, Laos is said to be constructing at least seven dams with a total electricity generating capacity of 7,470 megawatts, while another two Thai-Lao projects will see a total of 3,409mw dams. Cambodia will have a 980mw dam in Stung Treng and another 2,600mw dam in Sambor.

Investors from China, Thailand, Malaysia, Russia and Vietnam are reportedly involved in the projects at Pak Beng, Luang Prabang, Xayaburi, Xanakham, Lat Sua, Don Sahong in Laos, and at Pak Chom and Ban Koum along the Thai-Lao border, and two provinces in Cambodia.

The seminar also saw a strong argument regarding the impact on fish stocks in the world's seventh largest river, if more dams were to be built mid- and downstream of the Mekong.

"The issue is not about what will happen to the fish, but to the people whose livelihood relies heavily on fishery along this river," said Chris Barlow, from the MRC Fisheries Programme.

The Mekong has the world's largest inland fishery with 1.5-3 million tonnes a year. In 2000 it was 2.6 million tonnes, said Mr Barlow, adding that the real fishery economy was estimated at US$2-3,000 million per annum.

The MRC fish expert noted that reservoir fisheries could not compensate for lost river fisheries and aquaculture could not be a full replacement for captured fishery due to the added costs and different beneficiaries.

Professor Philip Hirsch from the Australian Mekong Resource Centre said that unless the 1995 agreement that created the MRC was revised to include civil society voices and concerns into the government-dominated process, future relations between the MRC and civil society would remain an unfruitful dispute.

Apart from the agreement amendment, the colossal task is to accommodate China's entry into the sub-regional body, noted Mr Hirsch.

So the MRC, NGOs and other players needed to find ways to overcome the lack of meaningful engagement that has marked the past 13 years, he said.

Jonathan Conford of Oxfam Australia, took the Asian Development Bank to task for failing to live up to its pledges of poverty alleviation, environmental conservation and sustainability.

At the ADB's annual meeting early this year, president Haruhido Kuroda listed as priorities in the ADB's new long-term strategic commitment, more of the same agenda - infrastructure development, regional integration, private facilitation - all under the banner of inclusive growth, said Mr Conford.

But the weight of accumulating evidence in the Mekong Region, he said, is pointing to the need for a fundamental rethink of the GMS orthodoxies around infrastructure, growth and poverty alleviation.

"Sixteen years of accelerated infrastructure development and natural resource extraction have led to irrevocable damage to the region's ecological systems and hugely growing disparities between the rich and the poor and between ethnic groups," the Australian activist said.

Dr Sombath Somporn, the 2005 Ramon Magsaysay award recipient for community leadership, said Laos may consider itself as a battery of the region by supplying electricity to Southeast Asia, but for how long can it sustain this?

"We need to re-educate the young people that water and light are interlinked; if we use water unwisely or energy unwisely we will have none left. We should not consume till everything depletes."

Dr Sombath also called for more corporate responsibility in implementing hydropower projects.

"Shareholders and board members of concerned agencies including the Mekong River Commission, and the Asian Development Bank should be held accountable to their noble pledges to fight against climate change. Stopping building or supporting construction of the non-EIA-checked dams is one way to help prevent global warming," he said.

He suggested that maybe it was time for ecological degradation to be accounted into the monetary cost of carrying out a project.