

Xayaburi Dam Stopped for Now

Contributed by Our Correspondent
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Could lightning strike again after the Myitsone cancellation

Environmentalists appear to have been handed a second rare victory in Southeast Asia with Thursday's decision by the Mekong River Commission Council to delay for an uncertain period the construction of the Xayaburi Dam on the Mekong River 100 km. inside Laos.

The council, comprising water and environment ministers from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, agreed at a meeting in Siem Riep, Cambodia, to seek international support to produce a more complete study of the dam, which is intended to produce power for the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand. It doesn't mean the dam won't go forward, and there are powerful interests including the Laotian government, EGAT, and Thai construction companies supporting the construction of the facility, which would deliver 1,280 megawatts of power to Thailand.

"The outcome demonstrates the member countries' continued commitment to work together in the regional spirit of the Mekong Agreement to bring about economic development without compromising sustainability of livelihoods of their peoples and the ecology," said Kean Hor, the chairman of the council and Cambodia's minister of water resources and meteorology. "Further study will provide a more complete picture for the four countries to be able to further discuss the development and management of their shared resources."

Environmentalists won their first major victory, and arguably one of the biggest ever in Southeast Asia, in November, when the Burmese government halted the construction of the Myitsone Dam on the Irrawaddy River, citing the opposition of common Burmese citizens in permanently halting construction. Like the Xayaburi Dam, the Myitsone Dam was slated to export almost all of its energy to another country, in that case China.

The dam, being built by a Chinese state-owned construction company, awakened latent Burmese outrage against the Chinese, who were regarded as colonizing the country. It was the first major signal by the Burmese government, headed by Thien Sein, that change was afoot in the long-repressed country.

Other big dams, including the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, the Bakun Dam in Sarawak have been condemned because of the environmental damage they have caused.

However, the Xayaburi Dam, 810 meters wide and 32 meters high, could well be harder to stop although at least 263 NGOs from 51 countries and thousands of people in the area have urged that it be cancelled. Its primary objective is to generate foreign exchange earnings for financing socio-economic development in Laos. Preliminary construction has already begun, with access roads and the dam foundation already in place, according to Ame Trandem, the Thailand representative for the Berkeley, Calif.-based Save the Rivers environmental group. Although the governments of Vietnam and Cambodia and a flock of vulnerable communities in Thailand have demanded further study because of the potential damage to the huge regional fishery and other issues, the poverty-stricken Laotian government regards the export of its abundant natural resources, including hydroelectric power, as the path to development.

A total of 11 dams have been planned for the Mekong, which feeds a river basin populated by 60 million people. It is considered to be the biggest source of freshwater fish on the globe, according to Trandem, who said anywhere between 23 and 100 fish species could be adversely affected.

“If Laos is serious in its commitment to the Mekong agreement, the government should immediately stop all construction and withdraw its equipment,” Trandem said.

Previous environmental studies have been done on the project, but she condemned them as inadequate.

“We know there will be transboundary impacts,” she said. “The Mekong River Council has confirmed that there is no technology that can mitigate the impact to the fisheries.”

In 2010, the Mekong River Commission commissioned a strategic environmental assessment commissioned by the Mekong River Commission (MRC) recommended in 2010 that all decisions on Mekong mainstream dams be deferred for a period of at least 10 years while further studies can be conducted. The construction, Trandem said, “would irreversibly alter the Mekong River's complex ecosystem, jeopardizing the lives and food security of millions. The project would resettle 2,100 people and directly affect 202,000 people living near the dam due to impacts on the river's ecology and fisheries.”

There has been widespread public opposition to the Xayayburi Dam both from within the Mekong Region and internationally. On Nov.30, more than 22,000 people submitted an international petition calling for the cancellation of the project. The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee has also spoken up about the impact on the Mekong.

“The (council's) decision is a welcome recognition that not nearly enough is known about the impacts of mainstream dams to make a decision about Xayaburi,” Trandem said in a prepared release. “International Rivers and the Save the Mekong Coalition are calling on the Lao government to immediately halt all construction at the project site and withdraw all construction equipment from the area.”