



The Tragedy of the Tasang Dam on the Salween River

The Salween River is the longest undammed river in Southeast Asia. The proposed dam and reservoir would flood an area of at least 640 square km in Shan State, north-east Burma. Ethnic groups in Burma, including the Shan, are systematically targeted by the illegal Burmese military regime and the use of Shan land for this project is another example of the illegal junta's abuse of indigenous groups' rights.

The area of the proposed flooding contains old-growth rain forests with a unique biodiversity. The area alongside the current course of the Salween River is fertile floodplain, farmed by the Shan people for generations and home to unique cultural sites.

Burmese military and a Thai energy company are developing the dam. It is in the late stages of construction planning. Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Power Co. Ltd. of Thailand is studying the potential for this project with its Burmese partner, Myanmar Economic Corporation. It will cost at least \$3 billion US. It is unknown who will finance the project but outside loans will be needed. Most of the energy created will be exported to Thailand.

Burma has a long record of human rights and environmental abuses associated with such projects, including forced labour, forced relocation, environmental destruction and suppression of dissent. Meaningful public participation in environmental decisions in Burma is impossible. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, who won the largest number of seats in the 1990 election in Shan State, has not been consulted about the project. Military troops providing security for the infamous Yadana and Yetagun gas pipeline projects have inflicted forced labour, portering, rape, violence, forced relocations and extra judicial killings on the local population. Forced labour and portering have already been linked to the dam's security. Military presence has grown as the military has conducted surveys, leading to forced labour and portering by villagers. Other major dam projects in Pegu Division, Rakhine State, and Shan State have involved thousands of forced labourers.

There are a myriad of environmental implications, including: fragmentation of the ecosystem (not only by the resultant reservoir but also by the roads that would be built for access to the building site) and the consequent loss of biodiversity, reduction in the replenishment of nutrients downstream, erosion of the riverbed and silting-up of channels elsewhere, the likelihood of an increase in malaria epidemics, the destruction of fish stocks, and the degradation of the forest by people who have no other option but to utilise the forest once their farmland has been flooded. The weight of the reservoir will also increase the threat of major earthquakes in the region.

Money flowing through Burma does not help the ordinary citizen. Instead it serves to bolster the corrupt and incompetent military regime. GMS Power's involvement in the dam project perpetuates a pattern of Thai companies taking advantage of Burma's political crisis for profit, under the guise of "constructive engagement".

The Tasang Dam Project is unnecessary. It will benefit only the military generals and a few private companies. The Thai government has consistently over-estimated the country's energy needs. The energy provided will simply add to Thailand's energy glut.

There are great obstacles to be overcome in fighting the continuation of this dam project, but it is essential that we support the Shan people in this struggle. Their underground, yet fertile, resistance faces grave risks in opposing the Tasang Dam project. We can help them to avoid this human, environmental and cultural tragedy.

To receive an action pack on the Tasang Dam and other environmental issues affecting Burmese people and their environment, please contact bcuk_students@yahoo.co.uk



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