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Press release by Shan community groups

Shan groups to Burma's government: The Salween River is not for sale

Shan community groups are holding a press conference in Bangkok today to raise concerns about secretive preparation to dam the Salween river in war-torn northern Shan State to export hydropower to China.

Over the past few months China's state-owned Hydrochina has been moving ahead with plans to build the 1,200 megawatt Naung Pha dam in one of Shan State's most contested areas, where there is ongoing fighting between the Burma Army and ethnic armed groups west of the dam site and a tenuous ceasefire with the heavily armed United Wa State Army to the east.

Amidst the war, Australia's Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation (SMEC) have been carrying out an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) for the Naung Pha dam in secrecy, clearly to avoid the widespread grassroots protests that blocked its ESIA last year for another Chinese-backed dam on the Salween - the giant Mong Ton dam in southern Shan State.

Unlike last year, SMEC did not hold a large public meeting in Taunggyi to announce the ESIA, and locals invited to its "public consultations" around the Naung Pha dam-site were only informed about the meetings hours in advance.

Since news of the survey leaked out, communities have been rallying to oppose the dam. On August 5, about 250 villagers from nine village tracts in Tangyan, as well as the local Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) MP, staged a protest against the dam. On August 21, about 60 community leaders from Ho Pang, Kunlong, Tangyan, Hsenwi and Lashio, including three SNLD MPs, staged another protest in Hsenwi .

Apart from concerns that the dam will cause increased fighting and displacement, villagers are fearful of dam breakage in this earthquake and flood prone area. Ho Pang, the main Wa township to be impacted by the Naung Pha dam, has suffered flooding and several earthquakes in the last few weeks. Ho Pang lies on the Nam Ting fault line.

China has suspended its own plans to build dams on the Salween/Nu River in Yunnan due to the risk of earthquakes.

Shortly before Daw Aung Suu Kyi's state visit to China last week, Burma's government announced they would proceed with the Salween dams, to address Burma's energy needs. Yet most of the power from the five planned dams, all being built by Chinese companies, will be exported to neighbouring countries.

"While all eyes were on the Irrawaddy Myitsone dam, Burma has quietly sold off the Salween to China," said Shan environmentalist Sai Khur Hseng. "We fear there has been a trade-off."

On August 17, Shan community groups wrote an open letter to Daw Aung Suu Kyi urging a cancellation of the Salween dams. They warned that unilaterally selling off the Salween, a vital artery for millions of ethnic people in eastern Burma, would undermine the peace process.

“If China really wants peaceful co-existence with Burma, why is it pushing ahead with unpopular dams which will stoke war?” asked Sai Khur Hseng.

A briefing paper “Concerns about the Naung Pha dam” and the Open Letter to Daw Aung Suu Kyi from 26 Shan community groups can be viewed on www.shanhumanrights.org

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