

Current Status of Dam Projects on Burma's Salween River

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Salween Watch

In late February 2013, Burma's Deputy Minister of Electric Power informed Parliament that six dam projects on the Salween River in Shan State, Kayah State (Karenni) and Karen State had gained approval. With a combined installed capacity of 15,000 MW, the projects will include the Upper Salween or Kunlong Dam, Mai Tong or Tasang Dam, Nong Pha Dam, Mantawng Dam (on a tributary), Ywathit Dam, and Hatgyi Dam. The investment will come from five Chinese corporations, Thailand's Electricity Generation Authority of Thailand (EGAT) International Co. Ltd and three Burmese corporations.

Originating in the Tibetan Himalayas, the Salween River flows for 2,800 kilometers through China's Yunnan province, into Burma and Thailand, and down to the Andaman Sea. One of the last largely free-flowing rivers in the world, the Salween River boasts one of the richest ecological hubs in the region and is home to at least 13 indigenous groups including the Nu, Lisu, Shan, Karen, Pa-o, Karenni and Mon.

Over the past decade, numerous dam projects have been planned on the Salween River: thirteen in the upper reaches of the Salween in China, and six along the lower reaches in Burma and along the Thailand-Burma border.

The projects in Burma are proceeding in areas where conflict is continuing between ethnic resistance forces and the Burmese Army, and are shrouded in secrecy. Salween Watch has compiled available information about these projects in this brief update.

Kunlong Dam

Located in Northern Shan State, in an area inhabited by Kokang Chinese close to the Chinese border, the dam project will have an installed capacity of 1,400 MW, of which 1,200 MW will be sold to China through a connection to the China Southern Power Grid. According to Hydrochina Kunming Engineering, several villages will be affected. An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been conducted, but no results have been made public. Construction has started in secrecy.

In 2009, due to refusal of the Kokang resistance army to become a Border Guard Force (BGF), the Burmese Army launched an offensive and seized control of the area, causing over 30,000 people to flee across the Chinese border.

Nong Pha Dam

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to develop the project was signed during the trip of Chinese Vice President (and now incoming President), Mr. Xi Jinping, to Burma in 2010. Only limited information about the project has been released and access to the project site is very difficult.

The dam is planned on a stretch of the Salween where the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and Shan resistance forces operate. Despite ceasefires with these groups, over 1,000 Burmese troops have been sent to this area in the past month, fuelling fears of a new large-scale military offensive.

Tasang Dam

Known also as the Mai Tong Dam, this project is located in southern Shan State. The investment will come from EGAT International Co., Ltd. (a subsidiary of EGAT) and China Three Gorges Corporation. According to information from EGAT in March 2013, Tasang's installed capacity will be 7,000 MW. EGAT International Co will hold 56.5% of the shares and plans to invest US\$12 billion.

Under a massive scorched earth campaign by the Burma Army starting in 1996, over 300,000 people have been forcibly relocated from their lands in southern Shan State, including from areas around the planned Tasang project site, with systematic human rights abuses such as torture, killing, and rape committed against civilians by Burma Army troops. Since then, the conflict has continued, including at Mong Pu Long, located upstream of the Tasang dam site and east of the Salween. Mong Pu Long, areas of which would be flooded if the dam is completed, is now largely deserted, with only a few villagers remaining who are unwilling to abandon their homes and farmlands.

In May 2011, some Chinese workers at the Tasang Dam were abducted. They were later rescued and brought to safety by the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S). Since then, security measures have tightened in the project site.

Though peace talks between the SSA-S and the Burmese government are ongoing, there has been continued Burmese militarization in southern Shan State and ongoing clashes, making it impossible for people to return home.

During a field trip by a Shan environment group in March 2013, it was found that since late 2012, a group of about 100 Chinese and Burmese engineers and workers have started to work in the area. However, they have moved the project site ten kilometers upstream from Ban Tha Sala. This will mean that the reservoir will stretch further upstream along the Pang River, a major tributary of the Salween, and flood large areas of Kunhing, a major township in Shan State on the Taunggyi–Kengtung–Tachileik route.

Kunhing (meaning “one thousand islands”) is located on the Pang River and has a unique ecology, featuring many small and large islets and cascades of waterfalls. It boasts rich natural beauty and biodiversity, particularly fish species. Fish from the Pang River are renowned among Shan people for their tastiness.

Impacted villagers have been given no information about the project and have no idea how large the reservoir will be. They only know that it is a “development” project.

Shan environmentalists have documented that the granting of logging concessions has caused large-scale deforestation around the project site. Currently, several hundred Chinese-owned boats are dredging for gold along the Salween between the Tha Kaw Bridge and Mong Pu Long, with no controls over the release of toxic waste into the river.

Ywathit Dam

Located just north of the confluence of the Pai River and the Salween River in Kayah State (Karenni), the Ywathit Dam is being built and financed by Datang (Yunnan) United Hydropower Developing Co., which signed an MoU to develop the project with the government of Burma in 2010. According to the MoU, the dam's installed capacity would be 600 MW, but according to Datang's website in March 2013, its installed capacity could be as high as 4,500 MW.

According to Karenni environmental groups, extensive logging concessions have been granted in the area around the Ywathit project site. Road access from Loikaw, Karenni State's capital, to Bawlake and Ywathit has also been developed.

Villagers from the area around the Ywathit project site have been fleeing from armed conflict for more than a decade. Most have ended up as refugees along the Thai border.

Karenni State has already suffered from the impacts of the Moby Dam and Lawpita hydropower project for over three decades. The fourth largest hydropower plant in Burma, the Lawpita Project, uprooted more than 12,000 people. Thousands of troops from the Burma Army were deployed to provide safety to the plant, giving rise to numerous human rights abuses by the Burmese troops including sexual violence, killing, forced labor, etc. More than 18,000 mines have been planted around the plant and along the route of the transmission lines.

Similar to the Tasang Dam, owing to extensive military operations in 1996, 212 villages located near the Ywathit Dam, with at least 37,000 residents were forcibly relocated. Most of them went to the Thai border and have not dared to return home until now.

Since 2010, surveying work for the Ywathit Dam in preparation for construction has been conducted jointly by a Chinese and Burmese team. It was reported in December 2010 that a survey team was ambushed by Karenni resistance troops near Pruso, leading to the deaths of three Chinese engineers.

In 2011, new military camps for Border Guard Force No. 1005 and special security troops were established to protect the Chinese dam builders. Also, the Burma Army Tactical Commander under No. 55 Regional Command based in Bawlake has been visiting the Ywathit area to monitor and strengthen security for the dam building team.

The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) reached a 14-point ceasefire agreement with the Burma Army in 2012. This agreement stated: "to ensure transparency around planned mega-projects (including the Ywathit Hydropower Project), both parties agree to provide information to the public and to allow the local people and community-based organizations to seek

information.” However, when local environmental groups tried to collect information from the area, their access to the dam site was blocked.

Hat Gyi Dam

The Hat Gyi Dam is located in Karen State about 47 kilometers from the Thai-Burma border. The project’s investment will come from EGAT International Co and China’s Sinohydro Corporation. With an installed capacity of 1,360 MW, the project will cost US\$2.6 billion. The project has drawn opposition from local people on both sides of the border, particularly among villagers in Thailand from the districts of Mae Sariang and Sob Moei, in Mae Hong Son Province. They are concerned about the cross border impacts on the local ecology and fisheries, and the inundation of residential areas and farmlands along the river.

According to Karen human rights groups, in the middle of 2009, the Burma Army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) attacked the Karen National Union (KNU) based in Pa-an. As a result, about 3,500 villagers, mostly women and children, fled across the Thai border into the Tha Song Yang district of Tak. This was the largest influx of war refugees from Karen State into Thailand in a decade. The attack, launched by five battalions of the Burma Army and DKBA and consisting of more than 900 troops, was not simply aimed at purging the KNU forces, but also targeted local villagers and internally displaced peoples (IDPs). The clashes took place only 17 kilometers from the dam site, very close to the access road from the Thai border to the project site and along the route of the proposed power transmission line.

This incident highlights how militarization and armed conflict has caused displacement in areas adjacent to the dam site, as well as human rights abuses by the Burmese Army and DKBA including forced labor, illegal taxation and rape.

Thailand’s Office of the Prime Minister set up a subcommittee to study and monitor human rights impacts of the project in 2009. In 2011, public hearings were organized in Sob Moei District, Mae Hong Son, and were attended by a large number of affected people. They voiced their concerns about the impacts of the dam on the river’s ecology and their livelihoods, as well as impacts on fellow villagers in Burma.

The subcommittee submitted a set of recommendations to the government, including a proposed study of transboundary impacts covering villages in Thailand. However, until now, no such study has been undertaken.

Meanwhile, EGAT has not given up attempts to push through the project. During 2012, they made attempts to negotiate with the KNU leadership. A team of EGAT and Chinese company staff also travelled along the river between Sob Moei and Mae Sam Lab-Ban Tha Ta Fang. This has raised concerns among local villagers because so far they have not been consulted about the project, and the study that was recommended by the Office of the Prime Minister has not yet been done.

The rush to push ahead with this large-scale dam project in Burma’s Karen State by private investors is also obstructing the peace negotiations between the KNU and the Burma Army.

Increased militarization by the Burma Army at the dam site and their neglect for the concerns of affected communities have heightened military tensions and led to questions about the sincerity of the Burmese government to proceed with the peace process.

Only two months after the initial ceasefire agreement was signed in January 2012, increased numbers of troops were deployed by the Burma Army to provide security for the dam builders.

Previously, the KNU had demanded that Hat Gyi Dam should be suspended pending political negotiations towards peace in Burma. However, owing to pressure from the Chinese corporations and EGAT, KNU had to allow the survey of the dam site to proceed.

Currently more Burmese troops are being deployed to the western and eastern banks around the dam site. There are now over eight battalions stationed in the area. A Karen environmental activist, Mr. Paul Sein Twa, commented: “The Burmese government should show their sincerity by halting all large scale development projects pending genuine peace talks and political reform. Only this will ensure protection of community rights. Right now, private investors are stifling the hopes of the Karens for a lasting peace.”