

Salween River Dams

“I would like to encourage foreign countries to think about how much suffering and destruction the building of the dam would cause for us. Without the dam, we already face many problems and struggle to survive. If the dam were to be built, I don’t think we will be able to survive anymore.”

-Elderly Karen Villager



Thailand and China to Build Dams in Civil War Zones in Burma

Burma’s repressive military dictatorship, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the state-owned Energy Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), and the Chinese state-owned enterprise Sinohydro Corporation are pushing ahead quickly and secretly with plans to build a series of large dams in civil war zones on the Salween River in Burma. The recently ousted Thai government strongly supported these plans and the current administration has done nothing to halt the projects, indicating that pressure is needed now to persuade them to end the unacceptable plans to build dams in an area from which peoples of a variety of ethnic minority groups are systematically being not only displaced, but also robbed, tortured, raped or executed.

Forced Labor, Forced Displacement, and No Compensation



Villagers collecting food from the Salween River

Where the Salween runs through Burma and along the Thai-Burmese border, at least thirteen ethnic groups, including the Shan, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Wa, Pa-O, Lahu, Padaung, Akha, Lisu and Palaung, live in traditional communities along its banks. Under the current Burmese military regime, there will not be any form of public participation regarding the dams, and the communities who will be forced to bear all of the negative impacts from dam construction will not see any benefits. It has been well documented that infrastructure development in Burma involves the use of forced labor. In addition, the military forces villagers to relocate without providing compensation.

Environmental Damage

The environmental consequences of the proposed dam projects will be vast and irreversible. The Salween River, known as the Nu River in China and the Thanlwin River in Burma, remains the longest river in all of mainland Southeast Asia that flows freely, uninterrupted by massive dams. The Salween/Nu River basin has been designated as the Three Parallel Rivers UNESCO World Heritage Site in Yunnan, China for its extremely rich biodiversity, rare wildlife and internationally recognized wetlands. Over one hundred species of fish, migrate up the Nu/Salween River and its tributaries. There are many rare and endemic plants, animals, and fish species, and the teak forests lining the river are some of the most fertile in the world. In addition to flooding villages and agricultural fields, the planned Salween Dams would flood several protected areas, including the Salween Wildlife Sanctuary.



Salween River in Burma

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Destroying Indigenous Cultures

The Salween River basin consists of not only rich biodiversity, but also rich ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. The different ethnic minority groups residing in the basin rely mostly on lowland rice paddy farming and upland swidden cultivation and harvesting of non-timber forest products, a lifestyle enabling them to co-exist with the forest for generations. However, often the local people are not able to engage in stable agriculture because of the decades-long civil war for self-determination and the struggle for democratic rule. Areas that are used for seasonal cultivation of crops, as well as important archaeological and cultural sites will be lost. The Salween Dams will completely submerge all of the sacred land, cultural heritage, livelihood, homes, and forests of the Yintalai, a tribe with only approximately 1,000 people remaining in the world.



The Yintalai: A Tribe Threatened with Extinction.



Children forced to flee from the Burma Army

Dams Used as Weapons of War

In the context of the almost six decades of war against the ethnic peoples of Burma, the dams present a strategic, political and economic weapon of the military regime. Preparation for the dams has already caused suffering for many villagers in Burma, and if the dams are eventually built, further abuses against local communities and the river ecology will result. Furthermore, political and financial support for dams in this war zone amounts to direct complicity in the Burma Army's oppression of the peoples of Burma.

Largest Dam in Southeast Asia

The Salween dams in Burma and on its borders would have a combined capacity of over 12,500 megawatts and would include the single largest dam in Southeast Asia. Two of the planned dams are inside Burma and two are on the Burma-Thai border. The 7,110 megawatt Tasang Dam, the largest of the series and also a part of the Asian Development Bank (ADB)'s Mekong Power Grid, will have a reservoir approximately 300 kilometers long and a concrete wall 228 meters high. Tasang dam pre-construction planning is at an advanced stage, with the detailed design already underway and most of the agreements already signed for financing its construction.

New Waves of Violence

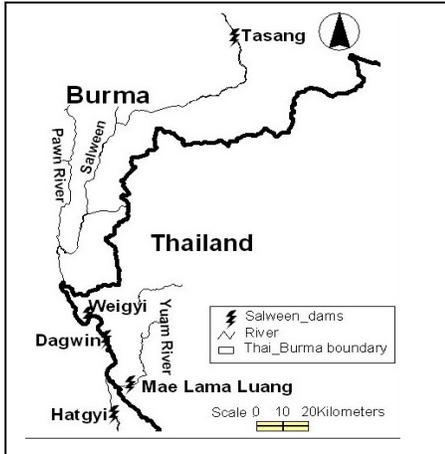
The first dam in a series of five dams is the 600 - 1,200 megawatt Hutgyi Dam in Karen State, where the largest and most sustained military offensive by the Burma's army in many years is currently underway. This new offensive, being executed as the most significant agreements between the countries and the respective companies have been finalized and signed, has resulted in an alleged 15,000 newly displaced people in the past 8 months, some 3,000 of whom were new would-be-refugees at the border. Landmines have been strewn throughout the area, one of which killed an EGAT worker involved in the feasibility study survey. Following his death, EGAT and the EIA consultant team withdrew from the site. Despite having incomplete data to properly finalize the EIA, EGAT plans to continue to the next stage of dam construction.



Internally Displaced Villagers fleeing in the Burmese jungle

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Lack of Information Transparency and Public Participation



In the May 30, 2005 MoU between the Thai and Burmese governments, Section 6 states: “Each Party shall strictly keep confidential any and all technical, legal and commercial data and information disclosed by the other Party.” Also, “none of the results of the joint study shall be disclosed by any Party to a third party without prior written consent.” This went directly against the Thai constitution where Article 59 states “A person shall have rights to receive information, explanation and reasons from state agencies before the government gives permission for any project that could affect the quality of the environment or life.” The MoU highlights one of the main issues with the Salween dams – all the government and business activities are shrouded in secrecy and are decided in ways that violate the Thai constitution and the principles of the World Commission on Dams.

Exporting Development Negative Impacts

The main stated purpose of the dams is to provide large amounts of “cheap” electricity to Thailand and “much needed foreign exchange” to the Burmese military regime. Thailand has experienced strong civil society resistance to building dams and coal-fired power plants in their own country. Thai officials have therefore worked to negotiate deals to import hydro-electricity from dams built in neighboring countries with authoritarian regimes where citizens cannot question government-backed projects without justifiable fear of reprisals.



Villagers forced to leave their home due to a development project in Burma

Multi-Billion Dollar Investment for Burma

Despite the high risk of operating in a war zone in what Transparency International rates as one of the world’s five most corrupt countries, the Salween dams would be by far the biggest ever investment in Burma at US \$10 billion, with unexpected costs and delays easily doubling the costs. Even building the Ta sang dam would pour a minimum of US \$7 billion into the country and the contracting companies, revenue that would help keep the regime in power. And although Burma faces a major and prolonged energy crisis, the country and its people would receive little electricity from the Salween dams.



Villagers protesting the Salween Dams in Burma

Given these serious issues we are calling for the complete halt of the plans to build large dams on Southeast Asia’s last remaining free flowing river in an area already suffering the atrocities of civil war.