

Villagers vow they won't give up homes for dam

Locals in Tambon Sa-Iab on the Yom River have been organised against a government-initiated deluge for years. Now with the Kaeng Sua Ten project back on the table as part of a massive flood control scheme, they're gearing up for another showdown *By Piyaporn Wongruang*

As soon as staff from an engineering consultancy company arrived at the site of the proposed Kaeng Sua Ten dam project in Phrae province late last month, a scuffle broke out between them and locals from the nearby village of Sa-Iab. Later there was another brief confrontation between officials trying to install water level monitors in the Yom River and villagers who tried to stop them. The officials were surrounded and finally driven out of Sa-Iab in a scene reminiscent of one 10 years ago when villagers seized staff from a consultancy firm employed by the World Bank, injuring some of them.

The incidents are indicative of the opposition the dam project has faced since its inception in 1978 as part of a water diversion scheme for the Kok, Yom and Nan rivers in the northern region of the Chao Phaya watershed.

Yet despite the fierce resistance over the years from locals and environmentalists, in September Science and Technology Minister Plodprasop Suraswadi vowed to push for the completion of the Kaeng Sua Ten dam and other controversial projects as part of the government's massive flood control plan.

Shortly after the country began drying out from last year's floods, the government came up with a strategic water management plan geared toward addressing flooding in the Chao Phraya River basin. Under the plan, forest and ecological restoration projects are to be initiated in the northern regions of the Chao Phraya watershed. Environmentalists were surprised, however, that dam construction projects in the North were included in the plan. Recently when terms of reference were put forth for bids on projects for the government's 300 billion baht flood management scheme, dam construction in the North was referred to as a "second backbone" of the strategy, worth around 50 billion baht.

Bidding is set for this month, with foreign firms from Korea, Japan and China invited to take part.

Environmentalists and activists have been keeping a close eye on developments and Sa-Iab villagers have been preparing themselves for another fight for their homes. >>

>> Seng Kwanyuen, a village leader, said during a recent gathering organised to review the situation that "Sa-Iab folks will tie ourselves to the pillars of our houses to stop the dam" when and if the time comes. "We won't ever leave our village."

NEW RATIONALE FOR OLD PROJECT

If the Kaeng Sua Ten dam is built it would inundate more than 40,000 rai of lush golden teak forest in the Mae Yom National Park in Phrae's Song district, as well as some nearby villages, including Sa-Iab, and surrounding farmlands. Villagers and environmentalists alike say they find changes in the rationale for the dam puzzling. During the 1980s, the dam was declared essential for relieving seasonal drought areas, while in recent years it has been a cornerstone of programmes to relieve downstream flooding.

The present government is promoting the Kaeng Sua Ten dam as one of six major dams needed in the North for both drought relief and flood mitigation. The project also includes a controversial dam on the Sakae Krang River which would inundate part of Mae Wong National Park in Kamphaeng Phet province.

Officials say the Kaeng Sua Ten dam, with a capacity of around one billion cubic metres of water, would help mitigate flooding downstream, especially in Sukhothai province and further downstream in Phitsanulok province. But dam opponents say that since the dam would be at least 300km from flood-prone areas of these provinces it would have little effect. Civic leaders from Sukhothai and Phitsanulok recently made the trip to Sa-Iab village to examine the dam site. A village head from Sukhothai's Sawankalok district said that floodwaters coming to his community usually originate in watershed areas further downstream such as Wang Chin in Phrae province, and Ngao in Lampang province.

The village head said that residents of these flood-prone areas are used to being inundated and have learned to live with it. However, he said, in recent years flooding in the province has escalated and he alleged that this is because of flood counter-measures initiated by government agencies. He cited the example of a high floodwall along the Yom River in the centre of Sukhothai city. On several occasions,



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VILLAGE HEAD BANG RAKHAM, PHITSANULOK

he said, the floodwall has burst, resulting in much more severe flooding. Yet the response has been to increase the height of the floodwall, which increases the risk, said the village head.

"What is lacking is a mindset that is open to local input," said the village head. "Don't forget that each area has a different topography and has derived its own local knowledge to survive flood crises. We need to give locals a chance to help tackle the problem — a centralised solution has not worked well."

Another village head from Bang Rakhm district in Phitsanulok province agreed, saying that if people downstream knew the facts they might oppose the dam just as Sa-Iab villagers do.

"We need to bring the facts to the table and discuss the issues," said the kamnan. "People outside our area say we are in trouble, and yes we are, but the question that follows is whether it is intolerable."

"I can say that people living in flood-prone areas know when and how they should move their belongings to higher ground and prepare food and other provisions to cope with extended periods of flooding. We are not like Bangkokians who are easily spooked by flood scares and leave their houses and property

PHOTOS: PORNFROM SATRABHAYA



RIDING ON RESISTANCE: The local sentiments are spelled out clearly on a road in Phrae's Song district, where villagers have long mounted a fight against government plans to construct a dam on the Yom River.



SIGNS OF DISSENT: Above and right, anti-dam posters are displayed in many places in Song district.





POINT OF CONTENTION: Above, a villager points to the area where the proposed dam would be constructed. Above right, another villager stands beside a sign marking the location.



Right: Villagers man a checkpoint set up to keep an eye out for governmental officials or consultants on dam-related business.

behind at the drop of a hat.”

The kamnan said that from what he could see on his fact-finding mission to Sa-Iab, the Kaeng Sua Ten dam is not the answer.

He is in favour of a variety of local water management schemes throughout the whole watershed, and added that most locals in his area are more concerned about drought than flooding.

TRANSPARENCY QUESTIONED

Hannarong Yaowalers, president of Thailand Water Partnership, a water management network monitoring state water development, said the budgets for the controversial Mae Wong and Kaeng Sua Ten dam projects had been approved by the cabinet even though their environmental impact assessments have not been approved. By law any dam project with a water storage capacity above 100 million cu m, a potential flood area of more than 15 square kilometres and a potential irrigation area of more than 80,000 rai must have an assessment which has been approved by the independent assessment screening committee. Mr Hannarong's group has learned that the two last conditions have quietly been ignored as far as the scope of the assessment is concerned. This has prompted questions of whether the government is taking unwise shortcuts to rush its flood management schemes through.

The assessment for Mae Wong has been forwarded to the committee, although some water advocates and environmentalists say it was prepared in a short period of time and failed to address crucial issues such as the



impact of the dam on forest species, including tigers. But Mr Hanarong said it is very likely the EIA will be approved because the government is so keen to go ahead with its policies.

Meanwhile, conducting an assessment for the proposed Kaeng Sua Ten dam has proven difficult as villagers often block staff from the consultancy company hired to carry it out from accessing the proposed site.

Mr Hannarong said the objections of locals should be taken seriously by the government to avoid costly mistakes in implementing infrastructure projects with huge budgets.

Chainarong Sretchua of Mahasarakham University is one of many academics who feel that the government should change its stance and embrace alternative water management options that would not be as likely to result in confrontations with locals.

He said the Kaeng Sua Ten dam controversy reflects an unbending mindset that government agencies have when it comes to water management, one that leaves very little room for social justice. He also alleged that powerful

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MAHASARAKHAM
UNIVERSITY**

people, with the collusion of politicians and bureaucrats, sometimes take control of water resources for their own gain.

Mr Chainarong said ideas behind dam construction in Thailand have been considerably influenced by theories on the subject from the West, where dams are key suppliers of water for industry and hydropower. In Thailand dam construction was first seen as necessary for agricultural development, and later for power generation. Government officials have kept pushing this viewpoint in recent years and it has become a major lure for investors, both local and international. As well, it has proved a boon for niche groups pushing their expertise, including consultancy groups.

During the first years of dam construction in this country in the late 1970s, international agencies or foreign governments would offer technical assistance or funding to Thailand. Much of the money offered would then be used to hire consultants from those countries to conduct studies, plan designs and supervise construction, said Mr Chainarong.

The US offered advisory help to Thailand on many dams through USAID and other agencies. Meanwhile Japan was a key player in initiating the Srinakarin and Sirindhorn dams via such groups as the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Electric Power Development Company (EPDC). Japanese companies involved in the construction of the Sirindhorn dam included the EPDC itself, as well as Ma-E-Da Construction and Toyo Menka Kaisha.

Mr Chainarong said that in recent years local consultancy firms have played a bigger role in advising government agencies, but this has not resulted in dams being any more palatable to the locals most directly affected by them. On the contrary, villagers

have begun to demand a bigger role in making decisions in projects that may impact them. Sa-Iab villagers, he said, have been developing what he calls "culture politics", using their families and local networks to force the government to take notice of them. They have been working with other locals elsewhere who also suffer from state policies and have raised the profile of the Kaeng Sua Ten dam to ensure that it becomes an issue discussed throughout the country.

At the same time, they have been trying to change or correct their own behaviours which may undermine their message, including deforestation, to show the public their determination to be on the side of conservation. All of these efforts have made the Sa-Iab villagers' movement strong.

Mr Chainarong suggested the government should be open to more public participation in water management policies. He said there are ways that water resources can be managed without dams.

"It's about social justice as well as water management. But I have seen little discussion on this aspect. Why are people in Bangkok kept dry, while those living in Ayutthaya are forced to accept floodwaters? Why are industrial estates given the right to build high walls that create more of a burden for those living outside them? These are the questions we should be asking. The government's 350 billion baht flood management projects will have no value if they create conflicts in the society, and I fear this is likely." ■