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Ethnic communities: Salween dams are fuelling war and must be stopped

Community representatives from Shan, Karenni, Karen and Mon States are handing a petition today to the Myanmar Ministry of Electric Power, and to the Chinese and Thai Embassies in Yangon, urging an immediate halt to dam projects on the Salween River, which are fuelling war and violating the rights of local peoples.

The petition, signed last year by over 61,000 people and 131 organisations, including political parties, opposes the planned Salween dams, which include the Kunlong, Naungpha and Tasang/Maitong dams in Shan State, the Ywathit dam in Karenni State and Hatgyi dam in Karen State.

The Burmese government, together with Chinese and Thai investors, is pushing ahead with the dams despite the ongoing conflict along the Salween, which has displaced tens of thousands from the projected flood zones. In October 2014, the Burma Army launched an offensive around the Hat Gyi dam site in Karen State, displacing a further 2,000 villagers, and there has been ongoing fighting near the Naungpha and Kunlong dam sites in Shan State. However, construction of the Kunlong dam is already beginning, for the export of power to China.

“Control of natural resources is one of the root causes of the civil war in Burma,” said Sai Khur Hseng. “Selling off the Salween before this issue has come to the negotiating table is bound to inflame the conflict.”

The planned Salween dams will produce over 15,000 megawatts of electricity, most of which will be exported to China and Thailand, while millions living along the river in Burma will bear the environmental and social costs of the projects. However, dam preparations have been proceeding without transparency and with no respect for the rights of impacted communities. Militarization and strict security around the dam sites makes it impossible to access information about the projects.

Roads built for the Kunlong dam project have caused people in over 60 villages to suffer land confiscation, and destruction of farmland and property. Areas in the potential flood zones of the dams are now also being logged and mined by military-linked companies.

The dams will have huge impacts on water flows, fisheries and agriculture downstream, but no information about this, or the possible risks of dam breakage, has been made publicly available. The dams are being built in earthquake-prone areas, causing downstream communities to live under the threat of sudden dam rupture and inundation.

“The government should not be prioritizing the energy needs of our neighbours over the security and sustainable development of its own citizens,” said Sai Khur Hseng.

International companies involved in the Salween dams include Thailand’s EGAT International Co.Ltd, China Three Gorges Corporation, Hanergy Holding Company, Hydrochina Corporation, and China Datang Overseas Investment Co.Ltd, while Burmese companies include the International Group of Entrepreneurs Co. Ltd, Shwe Taung, and Asia World.

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