

---

## [Vietnam starts resettlement to make way for massive Son La dam](#)

In Vietnam's mountainous northwest, the Son La People's Committee has moved the first 52 people of a total of 91,000 that will be forcibly evicted to make way for the massive Son La dam. In March, the authorities moved eight families of indigenous White Thai people to a new site, 200 kilometres from their homes in Muong La district. At least 13 indigenous groups live in the 275 square kilometres that would be flooded by the reservoir behind the dam.

The National Assembly gave the go-ahead for the 2,400 MW Son La dam in December 2002. The dam, which is planned to be built 200 kilometres upstream of the existing Hoa Binh dam on the Da River, would be Vietnam's largest dam and would require the biggest eviction of people in the country's history.

The project's cost is estimated at US\$2.5 billion, of which the Vietnamese government is looking for at least US\$750 million from international sources. Electricity of Vietnam hopes to start construction in 2005 and to start generating electricity in 2012.

In addition to the 3,000 hectares of forest that the reservoir would drown, the dam would have a major impact on the forests of northwestern Vietnam. Most of the rice paddies in Lau Chau province would be flooded by the reservoir. To provide land for farms and villages for the people evicted from the Da River valley, forest on the hillsides around the reservoir will have to be cleared. Building the dam will require a large amount of timber. During the construction of the downstream Hoa Binh dam, 70 per cent of state timber production from the River Da watershed went to the dam construction site.

The Son La project has been intensely debated in Vietnam's National Assembly. In May 2000, the National Assembly asked for more information on relocation and compensation plans and for feasibility studies for a scaled-down version of the dam.

However, project preparation continued. In August 2001, Vietnamese government officials approved US\$660 million for resettlement. On a visit to Lai Chau province, Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Cong Tan told the provincial authorities "to start resettling residents so as to finish relocation work by 2005."

In March 2002, the National Assembly postponed a decision on whether to go ahead with the dam until the end of the year. Mai Thuc Lan, the deputy chairman of the National Assembly, told Vietnamese newspaper Tuoi Tre, "The preparation for the Son La hydropower project has not been done carefully."

The proposed dam has been studied for more than 30 years. Several international consulting firms have benefited from contracts to produce studies of the Son La dam, including the Moscow Institute of Hydroelectric and Industry, Electricity and Power Distribution Company (Japan), Designing Research and Production Shareholding Company (Moscow) and SWEKO (Sweden).

Although World Bank officials say that the Bank will not fund the Son La project, it has funded studies

---

on the dam. A World Bank Staff Appraisal Report dated April 1995, states that the Bank funded "engineering studies for the Son La hydropower project". Four years later, a World Bank study on the energy sector in Vietnam argued that from an economic perspective, "The Son La hydro plant appears promising."

In 1999, a joint venture of SWECO and Harza, a US engineering firm, won a US\$1.3 million contract from the Vietnamese government to upgrade the plans to build the Son La dam. Montgomery Watson Harza (as Harza is known since its merger in 2001 with water company Montgomery Watson) is reported to be chasing the project management contract for construction of the dam. Montgomery Watson Harza is also part of the joint venture with Electricité de France that is hoping to build the Nam Theun 2 dam in Laos.

In 2001, an executive at Montgomery Watson Harza, perhaps frustrated at the National Assembly's lengthy decision making process on Son La, told Engineering News Record that Vietnam was "the worst of all worlds." He added, "They'll have to ease up in centralization of control."

One of the biggest concerns about the Son La dam is the fact that it would be located in an earthquake-prone zone. In February and March 2001, earthquakes rocked Lai Chau and Son La provinces. No one was killed in the earthquakes, but the cost of the damage to buildings and roads was estimated at around US\$14 million.

The Hoa Binh dam, downstream of the proposed Son La dam site on the River Da, was built with financial aid and technical assistance from the Soviet Union. Soviet experts warned that major floods could cause the Hoa Binh dam to collapse and recommended building a second dam upstream.

The risks are huge. If the Son La dam were to collapse in an earthquake, it would send a huge flood wave down the River Da, threatening first the Hoa Binh dam and then Hanoi, some 300 kilometres away.

Dao Van Hung, Director General of Electricity of Vietnam, appears unconcerned about the potential risks of building the dam in an earthquake zone. Voice of Vietnam radio reported that he told the National Assembly in November 2002, "Currently, there are more than 300 hydro-power projects in the world whose dams are between 100 to 350 metres high. The Son La hydro-power plant's dam is only 115 metres high. As a result, I think Vietnamese workers and scientists are fully capable and experienced to calculate the volume of construction materials and appropriate structure for the dam to ensure maximum safety."

By: Chris Lang, e-mail: <http://chrislang.org>