
Burma: Revival of the Weigyi dam

First commissioned in 1964, the World-Bank funded Bhumiphol dam in Tak province, north west Thailand, has never operated to its full capacity. In March 1994, the reservoirs behind the Bhumiphol and Sirikit dams (both World Bank-funded) contained only 7 per cent of their total usable volume. The Thai government's answer is to propose yet more dams on the Salween River, on the Thai-Burma border in order to divert water into the Bhumiphol reservoir.

The Salween river runs along the edge of Thailand for several dozen kilometres. It passes through mountains and rainforests, until recently the scene of armed insurrection. Thailand plans to deprive the Salween --as well as other rivers running along the border-- of some of the plentiful monsoon rainfall diverting it towards the reservoirs of its own dams and using also the natural resource as a source of electrical power.

Recently, plans by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) to build the Weigyi dam between Thailand's Maehongson Province and Burma's Karen State, have been revived. The dam will have a back flood that will go as far as 380-400 km to the north. Weigyi "Great Whirlpool", after completion, will be 168 meters high, with a generating capacity of 4,540 MW at an estimated cost of US\$ 6 billion.

The Thailand-based environmental NGO TERRA (Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance) says the reservoir, with a normal high water level of 220 meters will be inundating 15,000 - 20,000 acres of land that will displace thousands of Karenni people in Burmese Kayah State. The extent of the damage, however, remains to be investigated, though an EGAT reporting to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee promises probable destruction of thousands of acres of forest areas on both sides of the Salween River.

The Weigyi dam nonetheless still requires official approval from Rangoon, that had already signed an agreement with Thai-based MDX Group last December to construct a 3,300 megawatt dam at Shan State's Tasarng, 400 km upstream.

The Burmese Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy has already confirmed since Burma's Independence Day, 4 January, that it is firmly against foreign investments until substantive talks between the Opposition and military rulers are in place. Shans, Karens and Karennis have also voiced their condemnations on the dam projects since 1993. "This is a life and death issue," says a Karenni representative. "The Weigyi Dam would split the Karenni in two. It would be the final nail in our coffin. Damming the Salween affects us in so many ways: economically, socially, culturally, environmentally. It will break the Karennis' rice pot."

Article based on information from: "Environment Dam in Karen State will still flood Shan State", Shan Herald Agency for News, 20 February 2003, disseminated by electronic list owner-irnmekong@netvista.net ; "A paradoxical Alliance, Thailand taps Burma's rivers", André and Louis Boucaud, Le Monde Diplomatique, <http://mondediplo.com/2000/02/10boucaud>
"Over the hills and not so far away. The Karenni people of Kayah state in Burma will live and die with

