
Vietnam: highway project would gravely affect protected areas

On February 21st, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai approved the construction of a project to transform the historic Ho Chi Minh Trail into a 1,690 kilometres long National Highway, running from the capital Hanoi to the southern Ho Chi Minh City, former Saigon. According to the authorities, the new route would ease growing congestion on Highway 1, located along the coast, and consolidate national defence along Vietnam's western border with Laos and Cambodia. Cuban engineers belonging to the Cuban-Vietnamese joint venture construction firm VIC will participate in the project.

Since the Government gave the go ahead to this project late last year, the issue has been attracting the attention of the public opinion in general, and from environmental and conservation organizations in particular. If the currently planned alignment is realized, the new national highway will cut through ten protected areas (Nature Reserves and National Parks), including the famous Cuc Phuong National Park. This show of concern was the main reason for the dialogue held last May 17th at the National Environment Agency, organized by the Vietnam Forum of Environmental Journalists (VFEJ).

The authorities argue that in addition to its benefits for the national transportation system, the new highway constitutes an opportunity for 28 million people of 34 ethnic minority groups -including 200 of the 1700 poorest communes- to improve their living standards. Moreover, this infrastructure is seen as a way to reduce the negative impacts of the increasingly serious flooding that is affecting the country, especially for those people living in the lowland areas, and as a way to mitigate unemployment, particularly among young people, since teams of "Youth Brigades" will participate in the construction of the road.

Being this megaproject of such high strategic importance, it was expected that information on it would circulate widely. However, this has not happened. Little is known about the Ho Chi Minh Highway's Master Plan and its environmental impacts. Although some works have already started in some provinces, it is not clear how much forest will be lost or degraded, and what sort of impact the road will have on biodiversity. The secrecy with which the Ministry of Transportation and Communication is dealing with the whole thing has generated misinformation even among other governmental agencies.

Concern has specially arisen on the fate of Cuc Phuong National Park, which in 1962 became the first natural protected area in the country, representing nowadays the last stretch of lowland primary forest in north Vietnam under protection. The park area can easily be connected with Pu Luong primary forests in Thanh Hoa province, which would constitute a large tract of protected woodland. But the highway project will cut the park area into two pieces.

During the above referred dialogue at the NEA, it was made clear that environmental impacts of the highway on Cuc Phuong National Park are of no concern for the promoters of the project. Mr. Minh, Vice-Director of the Project, admitted he ignored everything about Cuc Phuong, and Mr. Than, one of Cuc Phuong authorities, said that they were not informed when the survey team came to carry out its survey. As a matter of fact, from the very beginning little discussion on environmental issues

occurred. Mr. Nguyen Ba Thu -present Director of the Forest Protection Department and former Director of Cuc Phuong National Park- said that he had never been informed about how the road will cut through the park.

Fragmentation of habitats have a deleterious effect on biodiversity. There is enough evidence that new highroads are associated with negative effects on environmental integrity of forests. The case of the Amazon forest is paradigmatic to this respect. What will happen in the future is uncertain, since until now the Vietnamese government has shown little consideration for the country's forests, preferring to promote tree monocultures (see WRM Bulletins 14 and 15), and to boast nostalgic nationalist feelings. Nevertheless, at the meeting concerned voices expressed that it is not too late to avoid that the highway passes through this valuable protected area, and they denounced that the Environmental Impact Assessment -required by Vietnam's own national law- has not been performed. As part of this process, alternative routing should be considered in order to minimize negative environmental impacts.

Article based on information from: "Ho Chi Minh Trail to be state's second main highway", DPA, Bangkok Post, 21/2/2000; Dharman Wickremaretna, Forum of Environmental Journalists, 18/5/2000; "Cuban engineers return to Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh trail", France Press, 8/5/2000, and Fauna and Flora International, Indochina Programme, 7/6/2000,