Thailand: For the authorities, reality at the Pak Mun dam does not exist

Dam megaprojects have been and are being strongly resisted in Thailand due to their adverse effects on local villagers' livelihoods and lands. One paradigmatic example is that of the Pak Mun Dam, which has negatively affected 3,080 families in the area, by causing a drastic reduction in the number of fish in the Mun River, fresh drinking water shortage, an increase in the incidence of intestinal fluke, and a potential spread of schistosomiasis from snail vectors inhabiting the reservoir (see WRM Bulletin 22).

On May 16th more than 1,000 protesting villagers and environmentalists occupied a lot next to the power generation plant at Pak Mun dam in Khong Chiam district. While one part of the group established a symbolic siege of the dam, another one navigated through the Mun River below the dam in 50 boats, and symbolically released a young Mekong giant catfish into the water. The action -which is part of the campaign "Let the Mun River run free" started in February 1999 to demand the river's rehabilitation (see WRM Bulletin 33)- is aimed to force the dam authorities of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) to open all eight spillways to restore the river to its original level and allow fish from the Mekong River to travel up and spawn in the Mun River once again, given that the fish ladder, which dam authorities built to allow fish to travel up the river, was a total failure. Even if the activists have emphasized that their action is non-violent, senior provincial officials have called them belligerant, and EGAT spokespersons have accused them of trespassing state's property. But in fact the action took place in complete calm and even the policemen located near the site remained at a distance.

A report by the World Commission on Dams released last March coincides with the villagers' arguments in relation to the loss of up to 80% of fish population in the river. Other negative environmental and social impacts are identified as well: the affected population has never been informed of the potential effects of the project; part of the peasants' lands was flooded by the reservoir waters; natural rapids in the Chi-Mun basin have disappeared, which has affected tourism activities. Dr Tyson R Robert, a researcher at the US based Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute even considers that opening the dam gates in the rainy season -as demanded by villagers- is only a halfway solution, and advocates for the removal of the dam as the only real solution to the problem.

Nevertheless, the authorities would not listen to any arguments or accept any criticism. EGAT assistant governor Supin Panyamak denied that construction of the Pak Mun dam has affected fisheries in the river, and an EGAT-hired biologist said the fish migration from Mekong to the Mun River is just a myth. How can they explain the decrease in fish stock and variety then? Regarding the other proven effects no comments have been formulated. A committee -appointed by the interior minister- to find a solution to the problem concluded last week that opening the dam's gates would help the Mun River's environment, seriously damaged by the dam construction, to return to its original state. Nevertheless, the authorities have been reluctant to follow the committee's advice, opting instead for the establishment of another committee as a way to buy time.

Definitively the motto of Thai authorities determined to defend the dam seems to be: If you don't want to see it, reality does not exist!

Article based on information from: Southeast Asia Rivers Network (SEARIN), 16/5/2000; , sent by Darío Jana, 18/5/2000; 8/6/2000 and 19/6/2000; "Pak Moon Dam. Study brings many ill effects into focus" by Anjira Assavanonda, The Nation, 14/3/2000.