
Peoples' demonstrations in Thailand

After the seizure of the Pak Mun Dam in Ubon Ratchathani Province that occurred on March 23th to the hands of five thousand people from eight different groups affected by existing or planned dams, false charges have been made against the demonstrators. The Government has alleged that opposition parties are supporting the demonstration, with the ultimate aim of bringing the government down. While local officials state that they don't have the ability to address the problems, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), which administrates the dam, has requested that the demonstrators be arrested for unauthorized access to the dam site. Because of these reactions, the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) has thus far refused to negotiate with either the government or EGAT. We are including below a statement of the demonstrators explaining their arguments and rejecting the government's accusations.

Another major issue in Thailand nowadays is the demonstration of the Northern Farmer Network (NFN), the Assembly of Tribal Ethnic Minorities (ATEM) and the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) in Chiang Mai, that started on April 25th. There were registered 40,000 lowlanders and highlanders who participated in the demonstration. One of the demands made by NFN, ATEM and AOP is that the four forest laws and regulations as well as forest-related cabinet resolutions must be changed or revised in accordance with the new Constitution which recognizes the right to participate in resource management and protection and community rights in conserving and managing culture and environment. Besides the legal reform, NFN, ATEM and AOP also demand the government to reconsider the draft "Community Forest Act" which does not allow community forest in the protected forest area.

After several days of negotiations not only no concrete solutions were reached, but also the authorities took intimidatory and violent actions against the demonstrators, who on the contrary had been acting in a completely peaceful way. See below Joint Declaration Number Two.

"The statement of Assembly of the Poor (AOP). Demonstration Pak Mun Dam site in Ubon Ratchathani Province

-Why do we have to demonstrate?

Because our livelihoods and communities have been destroyed by the failed development policies of the government, we, Assembly of the Poor (AOP), can no longer survive in our land. A good example of this is Pak Mun dam, which has blocked fish migrations from the Mekong River. The resulting decline in fish catches has had serious consequences for the people of this area.

The government not only ignores the impacts that it has caused, but continues to make more problems for the affected people. For example, this government cancelled the compensation approved by the Cabinet of Banhan and Gen. Chawaliti's Government for villagers affected by the completed dam.

-Why have we not demonstrated before?

Actually, the AOP, environmentalists and academics have protested against the Pak Mun Dam Project by urging the government to at least establish a committee to review and assess costs and benefits, economic impact and changes to the ecology of the Mun River system, but the government refused to do so. It is clear that there are many negative impacts existing, such as extinction of some fish, declines in fish catches and the spread of schistosomiasis. These impacts are the main causes that livelihoods of people along the Mun River have been ruined after the dam was completed in 1994.

The AOP has given the government more than enough time to initiate measures of resolution, but it still ignores the necessity of applying adequate resources to the problems of these poor.

-Are the demonstrators actually the affected people in this case?

It is stated by the AOP that the demonstrators have been shown to be the same affected people by two clear and transparent verification measures.

Firstly, the established demonstrators will verify the participants before accompanying the demonstration.

Secondly, the demonstrators will again be verified by the formal resolution committees who would be established by the government after negotiation with demonstrators.

-Since we have received some compensation to date, some may wonder if we are now merely trying to get as much as we can.

The poor have been calling for justice over and over without any sincere resolution from the government.

The mitigation and compensation given by the government to affected people during dam construction has been grossly inadequate, especially when compared to the negative impacts that have resulted. This so-called development effort has resulted in more sacrifices and costs than benefits for these people.

-Where do the demonstrators get financial support from?

The AOP holds demonstrations with internal funds. External funding comes from donations by demonstrators, as well as selling our products such as souvenirs, sweets, handicrafts, organic vegetables, etc.

Another form of financial support is the simple and economically efficient lifestyle of the group members. We help each other by bringing in food staples such as rice, and by cooperative collection of renewable food resources such as frogs, mushrooms, insects, wild vegetables, etc.

The AOP does not have any economic affiliations with political parties or foreign agencies. All transactions are transparent and easily viewed by the public.

-Are there any party hidden political agendas behind demonstration of the AOP?

The AOP has been urging every branch and government to resolve non violently the problems of all poor people who have sacrificed themselves for this so-called development. We have been calling for

sustainable resolution from every government not specific to any government party; therefore, our demonstrations have no hidden political agenda.

(Written by Assembly of the Poor. Translated from the Thai by Teerapong Pomun)"

"Joint Declaration Number Two. The problems of the poor must be resolved by the government.

We, the Assembly of the Poor, the Assembly of People of the Mun river, the Assembly of the Northern Community Forest, the Northern Farmer Network and the Assembly of the Hill Tribes of Thailand, have been demonstrating in order to demand that the government resolve the problems that have been caused by their traditional top-down style of development. Even though we have been demonstrating for almost two months, there seems to be no representative from the government willing to negotiate with the demonstrators. In a few cases, negotiations have been initiated, but there has been no attempts at sincere resolutions. The following are some examples of this trend.

The demonstration in Ubon Ratchathani province.- Even though thousands of people were affected by the four completed dams, the two planned dams, the land and forest management policy as well as the Dan Chong Mek Thai-Laos border Development Project; as indicated by their demonstrations from March 23 to the present, there has not been any representative from the government appearing to negotiate.

The demonstration in Si Sa Ket province.- Since April 20, 1999, 2300 village families affected by Rasi Salai dam and Hua-na dams' construction have been demonstrating at the Rasi Salai dam site. Again, no representatives from the government have appeared to negotiate.

The demonstration in Sakonnakorn province.- Thousands of villagers affected by the land and forest management policy of the government have been demonstrating since early April, without any response from government representatives.

The demonstration in Chiangmai province.- Thousands of families of villagers affected by forest management policies, Mekok dam construction, the public land issue and the government's lack of recognition of their citizenship have been demonstrating since April 25, 1998. The demonstrators had negotiated with a representative from the government on May 9, 1999, the representative then said those agreements would be taken to the meeting of the cabinet on May 11, 1999. However, there is nothing guaranteed that these agreements will be taken to the meeting of the cabinet due to the fact that there is now an official group which has formed and convinced some villagers to protest against taking the agreement to the meeting of the cabinet.

Moreover; there are some politicians and some groups of officers who have put a negative twist on the demonstrations. They have alleged that the demonstrators are paid to demonstrate, with the ultimate aim of ending the government currently in power. Another method they have used is to threaten the families of the representatives who join the demonstrations. For example, national park officers threatened villagers in Kwang Pao village, Jom Thong district, Chiang Mai province on May 9.

We jointly declare that our demonstrations in Ubon Ratchathani, Sri sa gate, Chiang Mai and Sakonnakorn provinces, in the name of the Assembly of the Poor, the Assembly of the People of the Mun River, the Assembly of Northern Community Forest, the Northern Farmer Network and the Assembly of the Hill Tribe of Thailand have no hidden political agenda, but in fact aim to get the sincere resolutions from the government.

We declare that we have to demonstrate because the government always refuses to put an effort towards resolving our problems. We have been making this request to the last five governments in power. We see their accusations of political agendas on our part as an attempt to put a negative twist on our demonstrations, and thereby avoid the responsibility of negotiations.

We see it is urgent that:

- a. The government must send powerful representatives to negotiate resolutions for problems of the poor who have been demonstrating at the Pak Mun dam site, Ubon Ratchathani province, Rasisalai, Si Sa Ket province, and in Sakonnakorn province.
- b. The government must take the agreements that were negotiated in Chiang Mai on May 9 to the meeting of the cabinet on May 11 to be considered without condition.
- c. The government and its officers must halt putting a negative twist on our demonstrations as well as all forms of violence and intimidation against us."

Declared at Chiang Mai City Hall.
May 10, 1999

Assembly of the Poor
Assembly of People of the Mun River
Assembly of the Northern Community Forest
Northern Farmer Network
Assembly of the Hill tribes of Thailand"

Sources: Aviva Imhof, South-East Asia Campaigner International Rivers Network, 29/4/99;
25/5/1999; Dr.Chayan Vaddhanaphut, Ethnic Studies Network (Ethnet), 1/6/1999.