

Damming China's Three Gorges

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LONDON — A controversial plan to build the world's biggest hydro dam on the Yangtze River will be examined by an international tribunal this week — and Canada is under fire by human-rights and environmental groups for its role in the project.

After decades of debate, Beijing looks set to go ahead with the giant project, which would partially flood a spectacular 200-kilometre canyon called the Three Gorges.

Opponents of the \$1.1-billion dam say it would be an unprecedented environmental and social disaster — threatening millions of people, and rare wildlife — and that Canada would have helped bring it about.

Supporters say it would produce vast quantities of desperately needed hydro-electricity and help tame the Yangtze, whose killer floods strike at least once a decade. Last summer, for instance, 3,000 people drowned.

The pro-dam lobby includes Chinese Premier Li Peng, a Montreal-based consortium that prepared a \$1.4-million feasibility study for the Chinese government and the Canadian International Development Agency, which financed it.

Debate about the Three Gorges dam has been as tempestuous as the river itself, and the project has had many false starts since it was first proposed in the 1920s.

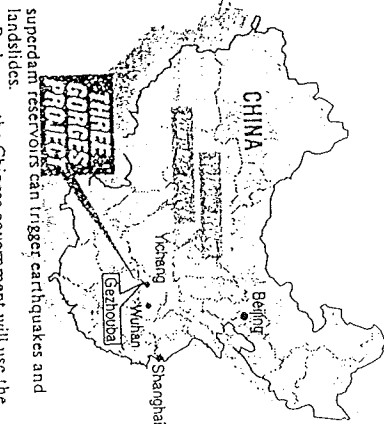
But there are strong indications the National People's Congress, China's parliament, could give the official go-ahead when it meets this spring. Recent Chinese press accounts have quoted senior leaders and scientists as saying the time is ripe to build the dam.

In fact, work has already begun. A highway and bridge have been built to the dam site. And an official Chinese press report last July said 50,000 people were being moved from the area in pilot resettlement projects.

If the 185-metre-high wall of a concrete and steel is built across the Yangtze, the stored water behind it would create a lake stretching 600 kilometres upstream. This reservoir would submerge more than 100 towns and 800 villages. About 14,500 hectares of the best farmland in China would be lost. Up to 1.2 million people would be forced off fertile fields and relocated to upland areas that are rocky and eroded.

In Canada, the anti-dam campaign is being led by Probe International, a Toronto-based group that monitors the impact of Canadian foreign aid and trade. Probe is seeking to "prosecute" the project's Canadian and Chinese backers at the International Water Tribunal in Amsterdam, where the case is to be heard on Wednesday.

Critics say the dam is more likely to cause than prevent a flood, because the heavy load of water in



superdam reservoirs can trigger earthquakes and landslides.

Probe says the Chinese government will use the Canadian study to seek international financing. Quebec engineering giant SNC-Lavalin and Hydro-Québec's international-consulting division helped prepare the 13-volume document.

Dam-busters say the study — undertaken by the same firms that will be bidding for lucrative construction contracts if the project goes ahead — glossed over many of the serious problems associated with large dams.

These include the potential methyl mercury contamination of fish and people that has been a disastrous consequence of the James Bay project for the Cree of northern Quebec.

Critics say that to dam the gorges is to dam the people — the many millions in the Three Gorges area and downstream, who rely on Asia's mightiest river and fertile valley for irrigation and food.

Wildlife experts believe the dam could be fatal for several threatened species, including the Yangtze River dolphin, whose numbers may have fallen below 200. The World Wildlife Fund lists it as one of the most endangered creatures on Earth.

The feasibility study says 108 historical sites, dating back as far as 10,000 B.C., would be submerged.

An argument raised in favor of the dam is that China faces a severe energy crisis in its efforts to develop. Dam-builders champion hydro-power as the clean energy option — an important point in China, where urban air quality is dreadful. One city, Benxi, disappeared from satellite photographs a few years ago, obscured by sulphurous coal smoke.

Half of rural China lacks electricity, and cities suffer frequent power cuts. But Vaclav Smil, a University of Manitoba geography professor who has written several books on China's environment, believes Canada's giant-dam salesmen are promoting an outdated strategy that views increased energy production and

use as a positive goal.

China, he says, wastes 40 per cent of its energy output. China could recoup at least as much as the entire 20,000-megawatt projected electricity output of the Three Gorges dam by introducing energy-conservation measures, Smil says.

Or smaller, less destructive dams could be built on Yangtze tributaries to produce the same amount of energy at a fraction of the financial, social and environmental cost, he says.

The scheme also raises a human-rights issue that some argue should be enough to sink the whole project: justice for local people.

Engineers equated one hectare of land in the fertile river valley with one hectare in the resettlement zone, and concluded there was enough land available to relocate all the villages.

China has 23 per cent of the world's population, but only 7 per cent of its farmland. The Yangtze valley is intensively cultivated, providing 70 per cent of China's rice and 40 per cent of its grain.

The dam's opponents say there is not enough new agricultural land in the region available for the one million "reservoir refugees." They say that until now the proposed resettlement zone has not been cultivated because it is too steep and the soil is poor.

The Canadian government could never get away with resettling 1.2 million people in this country, said Patricia Adams, Probe's executive director.

"Human rights abuses on this scale can only occur in countries where governments don't have to account to their citizens through public hearings, courts, or the ballot box."

"But the Canadian government seems to be happy to go along with these abuses in Third World countries if it means contracts for favored Canadian firms."

RESS reports in China and Canada have quoted happy peasants expressing delight at the prospect of the new homes, roads and services the government is promising.

"If you starve an area of development funds for long enough, the local people will support just about anything that promises improvements, no matter how unfounded those promises are," said Probe researcher Margaret Barber.

The project is highly sensitive in both China and Canada. Probe obtained a copy of the feasibility study under the Access to Information Act, but the consortium withheld many sections under a provision allowing it to protect "third-party commercial interests."

"So far we have no substantive replies to our criticisms from the consortium," Barber said. Jean Gagnon, head of SNC-Lavalin's Hong Kong office, says that "all of the aspects Probe raises have

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DAM Probe 'won't look at facts'

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been covered in the study, but they refuse to look at the facts."

Canada's dam-builders are furious at the bad press Probe's campaign is causing.

"Probe has tried hard to destroy that project and what they have done is very bad," Gagnon said. "Their campaign is damaging to Canadian engineering groups and the industry in general."

Spokesmen for the consortium did not respond to requests for further comment.

Jean-Marc Emery, a Canadian International Development Agency spokesman, said it paid for the feasibility study but is not promoting the Three Gorges project.

"It's not for CIDA to say if it's good," Emery said. And for that reason, nobody from the agency will be going to Amsterdam next week, he said. "It's a Chinese decision. It's not a Canadian decision."

In China, few voices are raised against the dam. Li Peng, whose background is in

water engineering, is thought to have taken a personal interest in muzzling the dam's critics.

Dai Quing, a prominent journalist and environmentalist, published a book in 1989, now banned, of interviews with Chinese scientists opposed to the dam.

She was jailed for 10 months after the June 4, 1989, massacre of hundreds of people at Tiananmen Square and believes her opposition to the dam was a major factor in her arrest.

Dai, allowed to leave China two months ago to accept a Harvard fellowship, said in a telephone interview that she was surprised when she learned of Canada's involvement in the Three Gorges project.

"I thought of Canada as a friendly and just society so I didn't think Canadians would want to be involved in this."

"It's obvious that some Canadian companies could make a fortune out of the dam."

"But I'm convinced that, in the long run, the problems caused by the Three Gorges dam would affect the whole world, not just China."

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