

WORLD NEWS

Journalists oppose Three Gorges plan

From SETH FAISON
in Beijing

IN YET another sign that China has lost control over its intellectuals, a group of journalists banded together yesterday to launch a campaign against a major government project: the massive dam proposed at the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River.

Criticising the project for economic, environmental and engineering reasons, the journalists called for an open debate on the planned dam, which they say could have disastrous consequences if approved.

"We came together because we can't keep quiet about such a large-scale mistake," said Dai Qing, a Guangming Daily reporter who organised a press conference for the group.

Dai and others said they would try to win support for their concern from delegates at both the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which opens in three weeks.

At the same press conference, they released a book of

essays and interviews assailing the project.

"We didn't use a penny of Government money to publish this," said the book's editor, Dai, as she proudly waved a copy. Yesterday's action appears to mark the first time that journalists in China's state-run media have independently organised such a campaign, and involves a project believed to have support at the highest levels of the Government.

The move comes at a time when intellectuals are speaking out sharply against government policy, highlighted by a recent call from

33 prominent intellectuals for amnesty for political prisoners.

"For years, we journalists have been following others. Now we are relying on our own views," said Li Pu, an official at the All-China Journalists' Association.

Opponents of the dam project were temporarily appeased in January when Vice-Premier Yao Yilin said that the current economic situation would hold up a decision for at least five years. But supporters of the project later said Mr. Yao

was only expressing his own

opinion.

Dai said that the enormous economic and political implications of the

Gorges plan, which, at 175

metres high, would be the

largest hydro-electric dam in

the world, argued that it

would provide much-needed

energy for a vast area in

central China.

Although the dam would

bring the water flow under

better control, reducing the

risk of floods,

Pro-dam lobby is still

estimate construction costs

at a total of US\$9.7 billion

(HK\$75.66 billion), but critics say the actual cost would be much higher. A former vice-president of the People's Bank of China has warned that it could total more than US\$100 billion (HK\$780 billion).

The journalists argue that making such a huge investment could have a disastrous effect on China's sensitive economy. Earthquakes are another danger, they

warned, while more than

one million people, many of

them farmers, would have to

be resettled.

Xu Yinchu, who pub-

lished the book for the

Guizhou Publishing Com-

pany, said he feels a respon-

sibility to support an open

debate on the Three Gorges

project.

"We think both critical

and supporting views

should be brought out so

they can be discussed

openly," she said.

Zhang Jie, a well-known

writer, added: "What I ques-

tion is that scientists are to

act with a scientific attitude. I hate to put it this way, but I think we have to ques-

tion their morals in this

case..."

"We don't want to put up

a memorial plaque that will

win much fame but little

benefit," she said.

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