

WORLD NEWS

Journalists oppose
Three Gorges plan

From SETH FAISON
in Beijing

IN/NET 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 orders. 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.

Proponents of the Three Gorges plan, which at 175 metres high, would be the largest hydro-electric dam in the world, argue that it would provide much-needed energy for a vast area in central China.

Although the dam would fill in the scenic Three Gorges area celebrated for centuries by Chinese poets and painters, it would also bring the water flow under better control, reducing the risk of floods.

Pro-dam lobbyists 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.

Dai said that the enormous economic and political implications of the project mean above all that it should be debated openly.

"This needs to be discussed at all levels of society, not just by a few men in a ministry," she said.

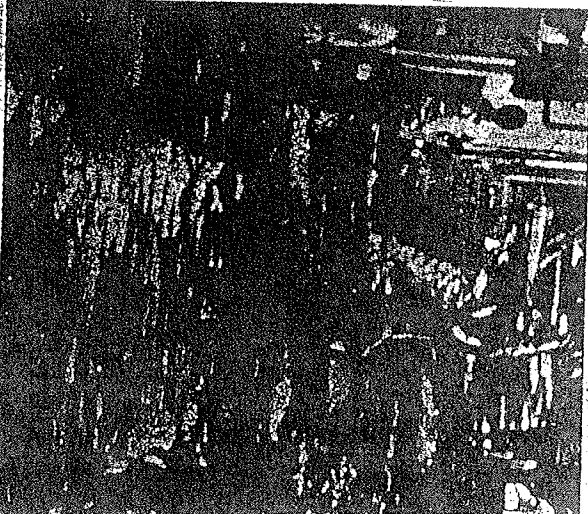
"Because this project involves so much money, everyone wants a part in it. But they're all after their own interests and the rest of us will suffer the consequences."

Xu Yindou, who published the book for the Guizhou Publishing Company, said she feels a responsibility 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 question is that scientists are too acting with a scientific attitude. I hate to put it this way, but I think we have to question 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.



Rioters carry off loot in Guarenas during unrest.



A riot.

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