

Of dams, damage and secrecy

In the third part of a series, Ann Danaiya Usher comments on big dams in the light of the "sustainable development" discourse.

Ministers from around Asia-Pacific are attending a two-day United Nations meeting in Bangkok beginning today, with the expectation of signing the region's first environmental declaration.

In spite of lengthy speeches, phenomenal expense, and reams and reams of bleached white paper, it is unlikely that any concrete agreements or positions will emerge.

Phrases such as "we, the ministers, commit ourselves to adopt an integrated approach to environment and development" abound in the draft document, reflecting its overall vague and non-committal tone.

On the non-governmental organization's front, the picture is equally bleak. NGO representatives invited by the organizers also spent three days

Pacific countries are secrecy, control of information, and suppression of public discussion of mega-projects — particularly by those who would be affected directly.

And nowhere is the need for access to information more pressing than with the big dams.

Across Asia today, big dam projects are poised for approval, and governments are busily courting the multi-lateral banks and development agencies for funding, despite massive and growing public resistance. The reluctance of both governments and their funders to release vital documents about planned projects makes open public discussion exceedingly difficult.

● Thailand's environmental movement has taken on at least five hydroelectric dams in the last three years, most of which were characterized by authorities using twisted and often falsified information.

The most recent dam battle concerns a relatively small project that would generate about 80 megawatts of hydro power in the southern province of Surat Thani.

It appears unlikely that the Kaeng Krung dam will go ahead because of massive public opposition in the South, though the final decision depends somewhat on the outcome of an environmental study currently being undertaken by the World Bank — which environmentalists are hoping will be made public.

The Kaeng Krung, however, is miniscule compared with some of the mega-projects being planned in countries all over Asia.

● The biggest dam project in the world, and possibly the oldest, is the Three Gorges in China. This dam would create a reservoir some 600 kilometres upstream of the Yangtze River, displace up to one million people, and have a generating capacity of between 15,000 and 20,000 megawatts.

Though Western environmentalists have protested against the project for the last decade, the first Chinese book critical of the dam, entitled *Yangtze!*, came out in March 1989. The author, journalist Ms Dai Qing, was imprisoned after the Tianmen Massacre in June without trial in a maximum security prison for eleven months.

Meanwhile, the most recent set of

feasibility studies funded by the Canadian government were kept secret until late last year, using the Access to Information Act, a Canadian NGO got hold of the 13-volume study.

The subsequent review by an international panel of scientists argues that social disruption and environmental considerations have been whitewashed in order to facilitate approval of the project.

"This is not engineering science," said geographer Dr Vaclav Smil of the feasibility study, "merely an expert prostitution paid for by Canadian taxpayers".

Though the project was eclipsed by the events of June 1989, just one year later Premier Li Peng revived discussion of the Three Gorges project.

● India's Narmada dam complex would be the largest series of hydroelectric dams in the world, displacing

specifications the Tehri dam could not withstand an earthquake.

The report expressed surprise that the project authorities had not undertaken a risk analysis, and claimed that the construction of this dam would be irresponsible.

Indian activist Sunderlal Bahuguna, who is attending the meeting, pointed also to the fertile land that would be lost and the creation of at least another 100,000 "development refugees".

"Since the Ganges is not an ordinary river but a river of spiritual inspiration to humankind ... [it] should not be turned into a source of untold disasters in our times when we are seriously making attempts to revive our dying planet," he stated in an appeal to the delegates.

● Similarly, across the border, the 2,400 megawatt Kalabagh dam project was until recently being promoted by the Government of Pakistan. With support from the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, the dam was meant to provide energy, irrigation, as well as flood control.

But Dr Nasir Gazdar of the Pakistani Environmental Management Society argued that the three other major dams in the Indus River basin have created massive waterlogging and soil salinification, costing 36 billion rupees (about \$40 billion) in lost of crop productivity each year.

The project would also directly displace some 120,000 people.

"The Kalabagh is a typical capital intensive big dam project design that is unable to address the most obvious long term problems it creates."

"Repeated efforts to gather the information on the official feasibility study reports of environmental aspects ... were not forthcoming," he said.

The litany goes on and on.

Clearly, it is not the government themselves who will put the breaks on such huge mega-projects. Nor, it seems, can the multi-lateral and bi-lateral agencies, who are so actively pushing the "sustainable development" concept, be trusted to change their funding policies over night.

At the very least though, a guarantee of public access to information that affects local people's lives could be a starting point for open debate and more sane treatment of our ailing planet.

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discussing their input into today's meeting, but their final statement, to be read to the ministers by Indian journalist Tarzi Vitachi, appears equally lacking in substance.

Even the fiery Indian Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Mrs Maneka Gandhi, expressed disappointment after seeing the statement, calling it as "macro-religious ... and platitudinous" as the ministers' own draft declaration.

So the governments are making no promises, and those NGOs present at this conference are pointing no fingers.

Where does this leave the environment?

Dams across Asia

Perhaps the most formidable obstacles to sane environmental policy in Asia-

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more than 300,000 people and inundating valuable riverine agricultural and forest land.

Though the Japanese this year withdrew funding for the project because of pressure from Indian environmentalists (including the Minister of State herself), the World Bank has agreed to disburse loans for two major dams in the series, in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh states.

● At the same time, the Soviet-funded Tehri dam project is slated for construction in the Middle Himalayas on a tributary of the Ganges River, amid more protests from environmentalists.

In February of this year, a report by the government's own Ministry of Environment and Forests ruled that the dam site was in the middle of a seismic zone, and that according to project