

CHINA: Officials fudge questions on world's largest dam

An Inter Press Feature

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Chinese officials yesterday appeared unprepared and unable to answer questions from environmental activists on the economics and environmental feasibility of plans to build world's largest dam on the Yangtze river.

The Chinese ministry of finance organised a briefing on the proposed 185 metre high Three Gorges dam that is scheduled to be built over the next 17 years. The briefing was held at Beijing's former Asian Games Village where governments and World Bank officials are meeting to discuss the future of the Bank controlled Global Environmental Facility.

The government was represented by Xia Ying Qi, social development division chief at the finance ministry, and Wu Guo Ping, an environmental expert from the University of Wuhan.

After an hour long presentation, a dozen activists and government representatives asked Wu if he had heard of a book called "Yangtze, Yangtze" by journalist Dai Qing, who was jailed for ten months after the Tiananmen Square troubles in 1989.

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The book is a compilation of critical essays on the proposed dam.

Wu appeared worried, looking nervously at the finance ministry official, before his interpreter broke into say that he had not heard of the book. He also claimed no knowledge of a study by the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Margaret Barber, an activist from Toronto based Probe International, pointed out that his statistics of a 10% rate of accumulation of sediment over a century did not match those of a Canadian government sponsored feasibility study, which said that the sedimentation rate would be 50%.

In reply Wu mumbled: "It must be a typographical error." Earlier in his presentation Wu cited the Canadian report as backing up the soundness of the dam project.

For his part Xia was unable to answer any questions on the financing of the dam. He said: "I joined the department a year ago. I haven't seen any of the documents." The dam which is supposed to cost US\$10 billion. Activists pointed out that the only other dam on the Yangtze, the Gezhouba, which was completed two years ago cost four times as much as it was projected to.

The Chinese People's Assembly approved plans for the dam this March and began pilot resettlement schemes for 50,000 of the residents of the river banks. Eventually 1.2 million people will be relocated and perhaps half will be moved across the country.

Wu announced that a specialist review of the dam had been completed the day before yesterday's briefing. The planning is now to be split up into three stages - dam building, resettlement and electricity delivery - all to be completed by the end of 1994. (MORE/IPS)

Plans for damming the narrow Three Gorges area of the 6,300 kilometre river, the third longest in the world, go back to the 1920s. The proposal has been shot down five times since but this time it appears that the building will go ahead unless unforeseen problems arise.

There was widespread opposition against the dam until 1989 and a great deal of debate was allowed to take place. Since the 1989 student massacre in Tiananmen Square people have fallen silent inside the country.

No mention is made any more of the potential impact of the dam on the Chinese sturgeon, the endangered white flag river dolphin and the Yangtze alligator.

The only public mention of damage is the impact on historical sites. Steamers travelling down the river from ^] ≡7E3^A ^]eChongqing city to Yichang, a few kilometres beyond Xilingxia, the third gorge where the dam will be

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constructed, now announce to their passengers the historical sites that will be destroyed as they pass by them.

The two day journey cover a 600 kilometre stretch, which will become a vast reservoir when the dam is finished. On its banks are over 180 sites of historical interest, some of which date back 10,000 years. The government says that all the sites will be excavated and rebuilt at higher elevations.

At the briefing, Xia and Wu assured activists and government delegates that everybody who wanted to speak out against the dam, had a right to do so. When the activists produced a pre-release copy of a new video titled "Say Goodbye to the Yangtze," the two hurriedly left the room and sent word to the convention staff to close the briefing room.

The video which was prepared by an anonymous group outside China and is scheduled for release next month includes a number of interviews with prominent dissident within and without government who have since lost their positions including Dai Qing, the author of "Yangtze, Yangtze".

Dai, who was allowed to leave jail and her country in 1990 has since returned to the country and is working again. Two days before the Chinese government briefing she appeared at an informal showing of the new video and spoke to activists about the need to rally international support against the dam.

Also present at the briefing were members of Dutch, Swedish and Norwegian delegations. All of them expressed surprise at the lack of preparation and poor quality of the government delegation.

The activists released a statement prepared by Probe International at the end of the government briefing that condemned the plans for building the Three Gorges dam. "we can only conclude that the Three Gorges dam will inflict tremendous human suffering and environmental damage in the Yangtze river valley," it said.