



Wan Xian, Sichuan: City will be submerged when dam reservoir fills

A home in never-never land?

One day in June, a notice appeared on my university campus in Beijing: "All expenses paid trip to the Three Gorges. Join us in investigating the Yangtze River resettlement." I rushed to apply, and that same evening, along with 20 other students, I was on my way to the Three Gorges.

Our hosts, it emerged, were property developers keen to cash in on the planned resettlement of people from the Three Gorges dam site. The company had purchased 130 hectares of land near the coastal city of Weihai in Shandong province, on which it planned four major developments, called American City, South Korean City, Japanese City and Migration City.

Our task was to persuade Yangtze valley farmers to sign a document committing themselves to move almost 2,000 kilometres away to Migration City. The company planned to submit the documents to the local

government and receive the resettlement relief funds allocated for people displaced by the dam. Cash in hand, it would then build houses for the migrants in the planned development.

Farmers welcomed us everywhere we went and showed great interest in our glowing descriptions of beautiful Migration City, which in fact did not yet exist. But they asked worriedly: How would they make a living? What sort of work could the company offer farmers? How much of their compensation money would be left after buying one of these houses?

Seeing their hopeful faces, I became uneasy about the scheme. Back in Beijing, I called the company to ask for more information. A secretary snapped: "We've bought the land. Isn't that enough?" The company manager failed to keep an appointment or to return my calls. ♦

Wei Yang

Sad truth of the happy peasant

China's official media have been eager to depict happy peasants thanking the government for their decision to move them out of their poverty-ridden villages on the Yangtze, and give them new homes, jobs and farmland. But this is not the whole story.

The Three Gorges area has been denied development funds for years while controversy raged over whether to build the mammoth dam, whose reservoir is to stretch up-river for 600 kilometres. Local people were never consulted during the long debate and have no right of appeal now that the decision has been reached.

The agonising wait and the prospect of being forced to move have proved too much for at least one elderly couple, whose suicides were reported last year in a small local magazine.

There are serious doubts about whether the government's promises to relocate people locally can be kept. And the much-trumpeted



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Uncertain fate: 1.2 million people will be moved

“development resettlement” strategy is still a theoretical concept, lacking the support of concrete experience.

The truth is that the Three Gorges area lacks the environmental capacity for such a large number of people to be resettled. The ecological balance is fragile. Intensive farming and population expansion have greatly reduced vegetation cover and increased soil erosion in recent decades. Much of the available land is too steep to farm properly. Creeping desertification already threatens the livelihoods of the

inhabitants, without another million people moving in.

A blow to the government’s case came recently when Pierre Senecal, a vice-president (environment) of Hydro-Quebec and one of the authors of a Canadian feasibility study which recommended construction of the dam, told a meeting of engineers in Shanghai that population growth had exceeded the study’s predictions, and there was not enough land to resettle people locally.

His words have fuelled fears that some of the displaced people will be moved to distant, ethnic minority areas, such as Xinjiang and Tibet. One Chinese newspaper announced such a plan last year, sparking international condemnation and leading to a hasty denial by Beijing.

Then there is the question of relocation costs. The man in charge of resettlement – a former Ministry of Water Resources official who has never handled a resettlement project before – says he plans to spend about US\$3 billion on the task, or about US\$2,800 per person. However, official figures show the average per-capita cost of resettlement in China exceeded US\$3,500 in 1990, and reached US\$6,300 for the Ertan hydroelectric project on a tributary of the Yangtze.

In the case of the Three Gorges, these statistics beg the question: will people be left wanting, or the resettlement budget greatly increased?

Much misery has been caused in the past by forced resettlement, and this time may be no different. A major problem lies in the fact that China lacks a system of democratic accountability and a judicial framework in which the decision-maker can be held responsible for blunders. People are rewarded when a project succeeds, but escape penalty or blame if it fails. ♦

Environmental journalist Dai Qing was among a group of activists who asked the World Bank last year for assurance that it would not support the Three Gorges dam. The Bank has not responded.

Dai Qing has written a forward to the recent second edition of Probe International’s *Damming the Three Gorges: What Dam Builders Don’t Want You To Know*, available from Earthscan, 225 Brunswick Avenue, Toronto, Canada M5S 2M6, or 120 Pentonville Road, London N1 9JN, UK. (Can\$15.95/ US\$13.95/ UK£12.95)

The flood tha

The Sri Lankan capital’s worst deluge in living memory might have been a blessing in disguise, because it provided a bruising reminder that development has destroyed much of the city’s natural protection against inundations.

It took a deluge big enough to breach Colombo’s previously impermeable class barriers – a once-in-a-century cloud-burst – to galvanise the government into undertaking its current flood-control programme in the capital.

Colombo’s poorest communities have become accustomed to gathering up their meagre belongings and moving to drier land whenever rains lash the city. As the rich on higher land complain about the inconvenience of wet feet, the poor abandon their homes on the banks of the Kelani River and around the low-lying swamps, marshes, canals and streams. They are sheltered, fed and looked after, but when the waters subside, so do the poor: they return to their tenements and shanties, and their plight is forgotten until the process is repeated the following year.

Because it was only the poor who suffered, flood prevention was not given political priority, and little notice was taken of the way that persistent clogging and covering of waterways had eroded the capital’s natural protection against heavy rain. Until 4 June 1992, that is.

On that day, Greater Colombo was engulfed by 493 millimetres (20 inches) of rain in 12 hours, one-eighth of the city’s annual precipitation. More than 100,000 residents were displaced and for the first time, floodwaters encroached on the capital’s poshest areas.

In affluent Kollupitiya, people found almost a metre of water around their beds. Electrical equipment and other household articles were flushed out, and worms, insects and sewage were flushed in.

Sausages and meatballs floated around the supermarket in Liberty Plaza. Expensive cars were abandoned