

WORLD BANK URGED TO STOP FUNDING CHINESE DAM

From Michael Chugani in Washington.

A NEWLY-FORMED coalition is putting pressure on the World Bank and other corporate money-lenders to stop funding China's controversial Three Gorges Dam.

The coalition, which includes leading Chinese activist Ms Dai Qing, moved as finance ministers gathered in Washington for the World Bank's annual meeting.

Ms Dai, who three months ago triggered a controversy while in Hongkong when she was temporarily barred by Chinese authorities from entering the mainland, said at the launch of the coalition's campaign the dam would be an environmental disaster.

The Three Gorges Dam, a US\$10 billion (HK\$77.26 billion) project to build the world's most powerful hydro-electric power plant on a scenic section of the Yangtze River, will displace 1.2 million people and flood huge areas of prime farmland.

This has sparked deep concern among environmental experts and made potential financiers uneasy, but Beijing is pressing ahead with the project.

"It is going to be the most socially and environmentally destructive dam ever built on our planet," the vice-president of Friends of the Earth, Mr Brent Blackwelder, said.

The coalition against the project is spearheaded by the Washington-based Green China which its president, Mr Xue Haipei, described as China's only environmental group.

Coalition members said the World Bank had promoted the project in the past, but adopted a low profile after the Tiananmen Square massacre when the United States pressed international lending institutions not to make loans to China.

Although China has not applied to the World Bank for funds to finance the project, the coalition said its campaign was aimed at discouraging international lenders from getting involved in the dam. "We are concerned that international funding does not occur in this disastrous project," said Mr Phil Williams, president of the International Rivers Network and a coalition member.

Another coalition member, the executive director of Probe International (Canada) Ms Pat Adams, scoffed at World Bank pledges that it would look closely at the environmental impact of the projects it funds.

"They're simply not doing it," she said.

Ms Dai, a writer and a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, said she was not worried about getting into trouble again with Chinese authorities because of her opposition to the dam.

"Each year, we are in awe of the hardships endured by the prize winners," says Rhoda Goldman, co-founder of the Goldman Environmental Foundation. "This year, the winners have succeeded in overcoming severe hardships such as critical illness, death threats from drug lords and extreme poverty. Regardless of these obstacles, they remain deeply committed to protecting the environment and are an inspiration to us all."

Establishment of the Goldman prize has drawn praise from 81 heads of state throughout the world including German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, French President Francois Mitterand and Fidel Castro of Cuba.

For the first time, winners of the Goldman Environmental Prize will be profiled in a one-hour television special entitled "Heroes of the Earth," which will be hosted by actor Ed Begley Jr. The special, produced by Golden Gate Productions (GGP), will be broadcast in syndication between April 19 and May 2 of this year.

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/EDITOR'S NOTE: Supplementary biographical information on the individual winners is available./

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