

Minister dismisses Tibet river diversion

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HONG KONG: It's a busy season for audacious plans in China. Having accomplished an engineering marvel in laying a railway line to the roof of the world, Chinese scientists are dreaming up ever more fantastic plans in other spheres of endeavour, some of which, if implemented, would have worrisome implications for India.

And although no formal decision has yet been taken, a sense of realism is gradually dawning on policymakers that these projects might be unscientific and financially unviable.

On Tuesday, China's Water Resources Minister Wang Shucheng poured cold water on one of the more controversial proposals, calling it "unnecessary, not feasible and unscientific."

The proposal, put forward by water conservation expert Guo Kai, would divert water from Tibet to the parched Yellow River as a solution to the drought-like situation in the economically backward Qinghai province in the northwest, and to further divert water to the north and northeastern regions.

The Great Western Route Water Diversion Project envisages the diversion of 200 billion cubic meters of water every year from three rivers — Yarlung Zangbo (the Brahmaputra), Nu (Mekong) and Lancang (Salween) to the Yellow River. If implemented, the project would effectively choke off water supply to the northeastern regions of India and to Bangladesh.

The comments by Wang in Hong Kong on Tuesday, however, appear to indicate that implementation of the project is far from certain. Emphasising that he was only offering his "academic opinion", Wang, a hydraulic engineer, said that China did not need grandiose, dramatic projects such as these to solve the drought in the north.

"As a minister, I won't comment on whether it's possible to realise the proposal in the long run," he said. "But as a water expert, I can say that the idea is unnecessary, not feasible and unscientific."

Wang pointed out that the project, as envisaged, would face profound financial and technical difficulties. "If another 200 billion cubic meters of water is poured into the Yellow River... all the dams and embankments will be destroyed immediately," he cautioned.

In any case, he noted, the high cost of pumping water from the Yellow River for agricultural purposes would inhibit downriver provinces.

The project is reported to have the backing of President Hu Jintao, who earlier served as Communist Party secretary for Tibet. Wang emphasised that the government had not yet taken a decision, but asserted that not even a single hydraulic expert he knew had endorsed the plan.

More than 600 cities in China were now suffering “serious water shortages” as a result of more than a decade of extraordinary economic growth, droughts and an expanding population, Wang said.

Recently, Chinese scientists had given voice to another audacious plan —to blast a gap through the Himalayas to allow humid air from the Indian Ocean to reach the dry Qinghai-Tibet plateau.

But that proposal too has been shot down by Prof Zhang Wenjing, a leading Chinese expert on glaciology and a research fellow with the Institute of Mountain Hazards and Environment at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Zhang said that in his opinion, such a plan wouldn't really help things much.

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