

China Dams Impact to People in Thai Laos Border

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For as long as anyone can remember, the water levels of the Mekong River have gone up and down according to the forces of nature.

But now, locals on the river say, things are changing.

Last August, a massive flood unexpectedly ravaged downstream communities.

While river authorities blamed it on heavy rains, many locals point the finger at China.

They say Chinese developments on the upper Mekong are changing the shape and flow of the river and endangering the livelihoods of other river users.

Elise Potaka has this report.

In the Chinese city of Xishuangbanna, fishermen sit under umbrellas, casting their lines into the turbulent waters of the Mekong River.

Some have been fishing here for decades and they've seen great changes.

The river's channel has been deepened and cleared of rocks to allow the passage of big boats.

And, as fisherman Mr Li says, the water levels are no longer dictated by nature.

"Before, the river's waters would increase in the wet season, and decrease in the dry season. Now when they open the dam gates, the water goes up. When they close the gates, it goes down. There's no cycle anymore."

The Mekong River begins in China, and flows 5000 km through six countries before reaching the Pacific Ocean.

China has already built three hydroelectric dams on its section of the river. More are under construction.

China has also been blasting rapids, that is, destroying rocks that get in the way of big boats.

Those living downstream say the impacts have been huge.

On the Thai-Laos border, Chiang Khong is usually a sleepy river town.

But last August, the Mekong unexpectedly flooded, causing two-point-four million US dollars worth of damage to this area alone.

The water peaked at 14 metres, a level not seen in more than eighty years.

In a vegetable patch, on the edge of the river, local farmer Ng describes what happened.

“The water came up this high, and made all the banks collapse. Not just here but also in my home village. We didn’t receive any warning, we just saw the water rising. Also last month, the water level rose so high that our crops were all destroyed. Now we have to sow a new round.”

Ng believes the flood was caused by China releasing water from its dam reservoirs after a period of heavy rain. He says everyone in Chiang Khong knows this.

This claim has been denied by the Mekong River Commission, or MRC, the body responsible for intergovernmental management of the river.

They say the flood resulted from a combination of high rainfall and a tropical cyclone in the area.

Over at the Chiang Khong boat landing, those who live and work on the river say they’ve also seen changes.

Jan Tong has been fishing here since he was a child.

“The rapids blasting and the dams are the main problems. And it’s a chain reaction, one problem leads to the next. For example, now in the dry season, some fish want to migrate, but if the water level suddenly drops, the fish get confused.”

At the guesthouse he runs on the banks of the Mekong River, local conservationist Watchara Lhieongsawad keeps an hourly tally of the water level.

He says he doesn’t think the upstream developments can be stopped.

But, at the very least, he wants more communication from China.

“They have to say when they open the dam and then the people can know about the river high or low, and we can decide what to do, today, tomorrow, next week, like this.”

Since 2002, China has been providing the MRC with water level data from two monitoring stations in Yunnan province. Information is supposed to be passed along the river.

But locals in Chiang Khong say the only information they get comes word-of-mouth from boatmen travelling upstream.

Concerns about China's actions on the Mekong have only been increased by its reluctance to become a member of the MRC.

Dr Philip Hirsch is the Director of the Australian Mekong Research Centre.

“When the Mekong River Commission was established, China was invited in, but China being an upstream country and being a powerful upstream country, it has limited incentive to join the commission. In fact, it does have observer status, there's more communication between China and the commission than there used to be. Still, China wants to be able to use the river as it wishes and not to be constrained by downstream countries.”

The MRC is also viewed with scepticism by some here in Chiang Khong, who say it doesn't represent the interests of ordinary river users.

Niwat Roykeaw is from the Chiang Khong Conservation Group.

“I don't believe the MRC. People like this know about the Mekong River, is economic. They don't know that the Mekong River is mother, nature, food, protein, everything from the Mekong River. Not just for electricity.”

The Chiang Khong conservation group has many songs dedicated to the Mekong River.

Songs about how beautiful and wild it is, about how it feeds people, and songs about how the river is now under pressure.

With at least another 11 dams proposed for the Mekong mainstream, the struggle to balance the interests of all river users is only likely to intensify.

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