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Irrawaddy Appeal

Irrawaddy, 'the great river,' is the main waterway of Burma. It starts in the Kachin State in the north as the confluence of the Maykha and Malikha rivers and follows a steady course to the south where it disperses into a network of streams and rivulets that feed the fertile delta before finally flowing into the Indian Ocean. It is the most significant geographical feature of our country, the grand natural highway, a prolific source of food, the home of varied water flora and fauna, the supporter of traditional modes of life, the muse that has inspired countless works of prose and poetry.

Today, the Irrawaddy is under threat. Lack of sound planning, the failure to enforce necessary conservation laws, and a poor ecological awareness have created diverse problems. The plains forests on the banks of the river are in danger of disappearing as illegal logging and charcoal production proceed at an alarming pace. Deforestation has meant erosion that in turn has led to a rise in the level of the riverbed and an increased formation of sandbanks. The building of bridges without sufficient attention to the appropriateness of location and design has aggravated the problems of erosion and sandbank formation. For some decades now, navigation and the procurement of potable water have become increasingly difficult during the hot season. Climate change is an additional factor to be taken into account in assessing the damage that has been inflicted and continues to be inflicted on the Irrawaddy due to lack of timely and effective action.

A relatively new problem is pollution. The proliferation of factories and the unregulated panning for gold over the last decade have introduced waste matter that constitutes a threat to rare species of fish, including the famous Irrawaddy dolphin, and to the health of people who rely on the river for water and food.

The construction of dams and hydro-electric power stations bring such benefits as the regulation of waterways and the availability of renewable electric energy. However there is a downside to such projects. The river course is fragmented and the strength of flow is weakened; decrease in sedimentation aggravates the erosion problem; although the water becomes clearer, there is a greater concentration of impure elements; during the course of the construction work much industrial refuse is generated, adding to the despoliation of the environment and pollution of the river.

A particularly serious problem resulting from the weakened flow of the waters of the Irrawaddy is the intrusion of salt water into the delta. This is detrimental to paddy production and thus affects the whole population of the country for whom rice is the staple food. Moreover rice is one of our major export items and any decrease in its production could affect foreign exchange earnings.

The Eight Dams Project

The latest dam construction, begun in 2010, is the prologue of the 'Eight Dams', or Myit Sone Hydro Electric Project, a joint Burmese-Chinese venture. This project has raised issues additional to the problems of dam construction outlined in the previous paragraph. An environmental impact assessment report has generated intense concern, in particular with regard to the safety aspect. The presence of fault lines in the vicinity of the dams and the sheer immensity of the reservoir raises the spectre of horrendous devastation in the event of an earthquake. Meanwhile 12,000 people from sixty three villages have been relocated. It is not yet clear whether they will receive compensation commensurate with the loss of livelihoods and the disruption to a traditional way of life.

As good neighbours, Burma and China have an established tradition of mutual regard and friendship. We believe that, keeping in mind the interests of both countries, both governments would wish to avoid consequences which might endanger lives and homes. Since the commencement of the Myit Sone project, the perception, long held by the Kachin people, that successive Burmese governments have neglected their interests has deepened. While recognizing that large sums of money have already been spent on the realization of the project, we would urge that in the interests of both national and international harmony, concerned parties should reassess the scheme and cooperate to find solutions that would prevent undesirable consequences and thus allay the fears of all who are anxious to protect the Irrawaddy.

Save the Irrawaddy

Ecological changes to the Irrawaddy would impact all those whose lives are linked to the great river, from the ethnic peoples in the northernmost state of our country to the rice growing communities of the delta. To conserve the Irrawaddy is to protect our economy and our environment as well as to safeguard our cultural heritage. Most important of all, uniting in conservation efforts would carry dividends in the way of better understanding and practical cooperation. Many individuals and organizations have done valuable research on the Irrawaddy and there will surely be no lack of information and practical suggestions that could serve as a basis for a conservation scheme. Much can be achieved simply by the strict application of already existing laws and regulations pertaining to the conservation of forests and rivers. We therefore appeal to environmental experts, to conservationists and to lovers of nature, peace and harmony everywhere to join us in a campaign to create a worldwide awareness of the dangers threatening one of the most important rivers of Asia. Together we can find solutions to problems, ecological, economic, technical, and political, related to the Irrawaddy.

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