

SEPTEMBER 27, 2007

China Recognizes Dangers Caused by Three Gorges Dam

By [SHAI OSTER](#)

BEIJING -- In unusually frank language, Chinese officials publicly acknowledged "hidden dangers" at the massive Three Gorges Dam, including landslides, erosion and pollution that could lead to an environmental disaster if not quickly fixed.

"If no preventive measures are taken, the project could lead to catastrophe," the official Xinhua news agency said on its English-language newswire, paraphrasing experts speaking at a conference this week. As an indication of the government's sensitivity to the issue, that phrase wasn't included in all versions published by Xinhua.

The comments are among the first official acknowledgments of unexpected environmental problems triggered by the dam, one of the world's biggest man-made projects.

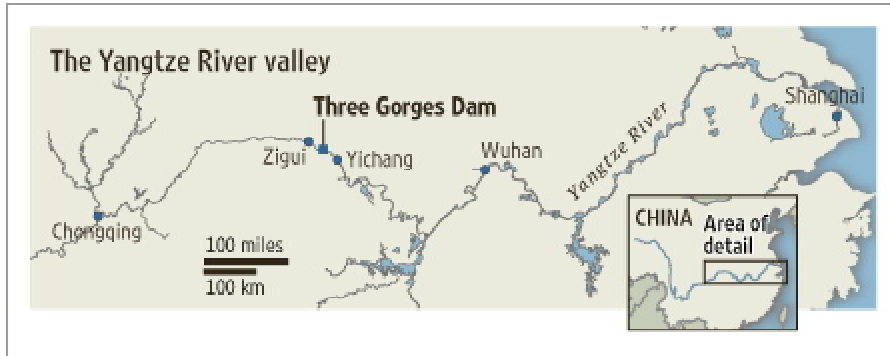
The dam was built to contain the ravaging annual floods of the Yangtze and to provide China's growing economy with a cleaner source of electricity, but it also became a sign of the costs of China's rapid development. From its inception, the dam has been the target of criticism for the forced relocation of more than one million residents, burial of important historical relics and its radical reshaping of the Yangtze River basin, among other issues. Early criticism of the dam was often harshly suppressed. Construction of the dam, which cost at least \$22 billion and was begun in 1994, still isn't complete.

The officials' remarks came at a meeting called to discuss the dam's impact. "We can by no means relax our vigilance against ecological and environmental security problems or profit from a fleeting economic boom at the cost of sacrificing the environment," said Wang Xiaofeng, director of the office of the Three Gorges Project Committee of the State Council, the administrative office in charge of building the dam, according to Xinhua.

Other experts at the meeting said the reservoir had triggered life-threatening landslides, and they warned that downstream riverbanks were being eroded. State media said the participants found the dam had a "notably adverse" impact on the 400-mile stretch of the reservoir. The vice mayor of Chongqing, a large city along the reservoir's banks, said the Three Gorges shores had collapsed in 91 places.

Mr. Wang said Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao had raised the issue of environmental problems at the dam during a meeting of China's cabinet earlier this year.

Another official, Li Chunming, the vice governor of Hubei province, through which the Yangtze River flows, warned that water discharged from the dam was eroding protective downstream embankments. Scientists say the river is now flowing faster because silt that used to slow it down is trapped behind the dam.



In places such as the village of Miaohe, the threat of landslides is so severe that villagers are being forced to relocate, as reported in a recent article in The Wall Street Journal on the dam's growing problems.

"The problems mentioned in The Wall Street Journal should merit adequate attention from all of us," said Mr. Wang of the council's project committee, according to Xinhua's English-language release.

There have been several recent landslides in the region, including one on June 28 that killed four villagers, according to a local-government Web site. Four other villagers remain missing.

All this comes as China grapples with a mounting water shortage. Across the country, millions of tons of raw sewage, industrial waste and fertilizer runoff have turned lakes into algae-covered cesspools. According to official statistics, more than half of China's major waterways are so polluted that fish are dying or water is unsafe for drinking or irrigation. More than 300 million people -- almost one-quarter of the population -- lack access to clean drinking water, the government says.

The government has been stepping up efforts to rein in the environmental toll of China's breakneck economic growth. Yesterday, China's cabinet approved a five-year plan laying out major goals and measures to tackle pollution. "China is suffering from increasing conflicts between economic and social development and constraints in resources and energy," the State Council said in a document, according to state media.

—*Kersten Zhang contributed to this article.*

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