

# FEATURE-China's giant water scheme opens torrent of discontent

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By Chris Buckley

XICHUAN, [China](#) Feb 27 (Reuters) - China's vast scheme to channel southern rivers to its parched north faces potentially explosive defiance at a dam where bitter memories and an unsure future are driving farmers to protest the nation-spanning feat.

In Machuan Village, beside the Danjiangkou Dam in central China, hundreds of farmers recently spilled out of crumbling mud-brick homes to denounce plans to resettle them soon for the rising reservoir, which will store water for Beijing, Tianjin and farmland along 1,421 km (883 miles) of canals and tunnels.

Ruddy villagers in frayed blue coats and smocks yelled that they will be forced onto small plots hundreds of kilometres away. Some showed written pleas they said were sent to state leaders.

"If we don't get what we need, we'll resist moving, we'll block them from taking us, we'll lock ourselves in," said Chai Fangying, a 60-year-old farmer who said she had already been moved several times over her life because of the dam.

The crowd berated a village official and shouted out claims that their impending removal has been dogged by corruption, long neglect and coerced signing of agreements to move.

The anger could harden into protests, impeding plans to open the central route of the South-to-North Water Transfer Project by 2014. (See factbox [ID:nPEK91076]). At the Three Gorges Dam, the nation's other mighty hydro project, such clashes dogged the move of 1.4 million residents.

The government has said 330,000 residents near Danjiangkou must move over 5 years from June, and it has promised them homes and farms elsewhere in Henan and Hubei provinces. The reservoir lies between these provinces, catching the Han and Dan Rivers.

Virtually all the dozens of villagers interviewed near the dam in Xichuan County, Henan, said the distant land offered was too poor, too little and boded no end to lifelong insecurity.

Many had already moved several times in past decades to escape the expanding reservoir. Thousands died of starvation in one distant exodus soon after dam building began in

1958. (See related story [ID:nPEK158045])

The grassroots anger also dramatises broader conflict over who bears the costs of China's vast ventures in engineering and resettlement, long central to nation-building and now crucial to public spending plans to revive the slowed economy.

This year's drought has reminded China's leaders of the frailty of water reserves as cities and factories expand.

The central and eastern routes of the project may ease that crisis, at an official cost of 254.6 billion yuan (\$37.4 billion) for the first stage alone. Later expansions are planned.

Yet the Communist Party also fears discontent that could erode its rule as growth slows.

Some 12.5 million Chinese citizens have been moved for 86,000 dams since 1949, according to one recent study, and these "dam migrants" have long fanned festering unrest.

Even this week, the Ministry of Water Resources issued a notice that said "protecting social stability in dam areas" was needed to protect vital investment.

In Machuan and nearby, however, many farmers said the price they must pay for their government's ambitions was too heavy.

"I've waited 40 years because of the dam, waited for life to get better," said Zhao Fengmian of Shizigang Village, which must also move this year. "We can move if that's what the country needs. But what about our needs?"

## A DECAYING LIMBO

For decades, the farmers in Shizigang, a village of 900 people, have been told they may soon move for the long-planned transfer project, which will raise the dam level from its present 157 (515 feet) metres above sea level in high season to 170 metres (558 feet).

They have not dared spend on houses, and the government has skimmed on irrigation, roads and services. The walls and roofs of mud-brick homes are cracked, warped or fallen in. Fields on nearby slopes lack irrigation. Their rapeseed and wheat crops have yellowed in this year's drought, despite the nearby dam.

"Our life is all waiting to move," said Zhao Xuehao, a 27-year-old farmer from Shizigang, gulping down the ribbon-like noodles that here are often breakfast, lunch and dinner. He like many fellow villagers belonged to a clan with the same surname.

"It's even hard to get married, because the men don't have any land that will always be there. The women worry that men like that won't have a home or a stable future."

The village lies on a low spit, and it and Machuan Village on the opposite bank are among 10 villages in Xichuan slated to leave this year, in a move officials hope will display the benefits of relocation to other farmers.

But here that prospect has brought fear and anger to farmers with bitter memories of past exoduses.

The plan to build the dam and eventually channel its waters north was first officially approved in 1958 by Mao Zedong, the nation's revolutionary founder. But dam building was caught in Mao's rush to create a Communist utopia, and stopped for years after primitive concrete-laying created massive cracks in the wall.

In the decades before and after the dam was finished in 1973, 436,000 villagers were forced to move, often in hurried, unplanned evacuations for meagre compensation, say historic records.

In 2002, when the government announced the central canal for the project would be built, villagers were told to prepare to shift again. They have been waiting ever since as scheduled completion of the canal has been pushed from 2008 to 2010 and now 2014.

"We're locked in a room and can't see or hear what's happening to us," said Zhao Jingming, a 63-year-old farmer in Shizigang with a hoarse bellow that silenced his neighbours.

"If our problems aren't solved, then the villagers won't move," he said, drawing a chorus of ascent from them.

Xichuan officials said villagers facing resettlement were pleased to go or accepted some sacrifice as necessary.

"The interests of the individual will yield to the collective interests," said Liang Zhanpei, a dam resettlement spokesman for the county, in an interview with Reuters.

Liang said the new farmland offered to migrants may not be enough alone to live on. But they can work in factories or as migrant labourers, he added.

Many of Machuan's 1,000 or so villagers scoffed at the idea.

"They want us to go and work as migrant labourers. The young can do that, but not the older ones. The financial crisis means many migrant workers have lost their jobs," said Quan Weifeng, a 46-year-old farmer. "If we won't go, they'll force us. But I've decided I'll resist."

(Editing by Megan Goldin)