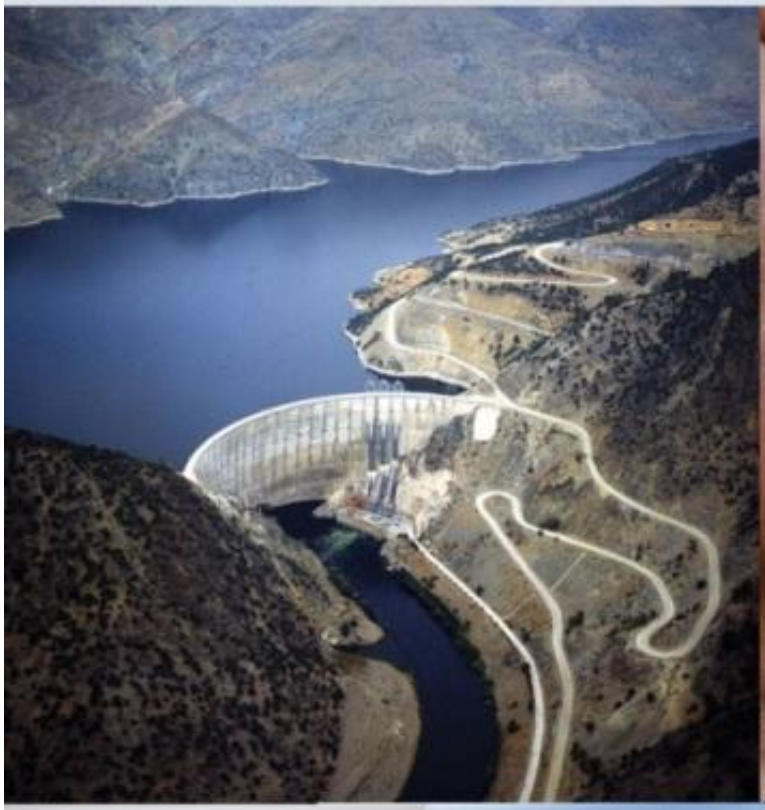


ORSAM WATER BULLETIN

Weekly Bulletin by ORSAM Water Research Programme

Events-News-Politics-Projects-Environment-ClimateChange-Neighbourhoods-Cooperation-Disputes-Scarcity and more





Issue 217

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❖ Lake Urmia: how Iran's most famous lake is disappearing

In the late 1990s, Lake Urmia, in north-western Iran, was twice as large as Luxembourg and the largest salt-water lake in the Middle East. Since then it has shrunk substantially, and was sliced in half in 2008, with consequences uncertain to this day, by a 15-km causeway designed to shorten the travel time between the cities of Urmia and Tabriz.

Historically, the lake attracted migratory birds including flamingos, pelicans, ducks and egrets. Its drying up, or desiccation, is undermining the local food web, especially by destroying one of the world's largest natural habitats of the brine shrimp Artemia, a hardy species that can tolerate salinity levels of 340 grams per litre, more than eight times saltier than ocean water.

Effects on humans are perhaps even more complicated. The tourism sector has clearly lost out. While the lake once attracted visitors from near and far, some believing in its therapeutic properties, Urmia has turned into a vast salt-white barren land with beached boats serving as a striking image of what the future may hold.

Desiccation will increase the frequency of salt storms that sweep across the exposed lakebed, diminishing the productivity of surrounding agricultural lands and encouraging farmers to move away. Poor air, land, and water quality all have serious health effects including respiratory and eye diseases .

The people of the north west – mainly Azeris and Kurds – are raising their voices. The Azeris, one of Iran's most influential ethnic groups and about a third of the country's population, venerate Urmia as a symbol of Azeri identity, dubbing it "the turquoise solitaire of Azerbaijan". The region is also home to many Kurds, who are demanding a bigger say in the management of the lake to improve the livelihood of Kurdish communities.

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President Hassan Rouhani has shown he is listening, referring to Urmia during his election campaign, and subsequently promising the equivalent of $5 billion to help revive the lake over ten years. Solutions, however, require agreement on the main causes of the problem, and this motivated a group of concerned Iranian researchers in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom to carry out an independent, first-hand assessment beginning in 2013. Because of the unavailability of reliable and consistent ground-truth data, the team used high-resolution satellite observations over the past four decades to estimate the lake's physiographic changes.

The results of this investigation, which recently appeared in the Journal of Great Lakes Research, revealed that in September 2014 the lake's surface area was about 12% of its average size in the 1970s, a far bigger fall than previously realised. The research undermines any notion of a crisis caused primarily by climate changes. It shows that the pattern of droughts in the region has not changed significantly, and that Lake Urmia survived more severe droughts in the past.

The lake's surface area naturally varies to some extent between wet and dry seasons and the situation has eased somewhat with seasonal precipitation that occurred since September. But the magnitude and timeline of the shrinkage -– frequently attributed by the Iranian water authorities to years of below-average precipitation – are unquestionably beyond the ordinary, and suggest that the lake may have reached a "tipping point" leading to sudden death. If Lake Urmia is to be revived, the authorities must look urgently at the construction of dams and irrigation projects designed to boost agri-business and meet growing regional water demand.

The tragic demise of the Aral Sea in central Asia is a chilling precedent. Once one of the world's largest lakes, the Aral Sea faded away due to diversion of water for agriculture from its tributaries, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. The Aral Sea became a hallmark of poor agricultural water

management in the Soviet era. Over the course of five decades its surface area dropped to less than 10% of its original extent in the 1960s

It is ironic that the collapse of Lake Urmia and other Iranian water bodies such as Shadegan, Gav-Khuni, Bakhtegan, Anzali, and Hamouns comes in the country where the 1971 Ramsar Convention was signed. As a pioneering intergovernmental treaty for conservation and sustainable use of wetlands, Ramsar envisaged action by both national governments and international co-operation.

Just five years later, in 1976, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) designated Lake Urmia a biosphere reserve to encourage sustainable development grounded in community involvement and sound science.

Given the far-reaching socio-economic effects, and human health impacts that may extend beyond Iran's borders, Lake Urmia's collapse requires active involvement of international organisations that can provide expertise and financial resources, even if their efforts to help are complicated by sanctions blocking financial transactions. These include UNESCO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the World Bank, World Climate Research Programme (WCRP), European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) and World Health Organization (WHO).

On the bright side, growing public awareness about water scarcity, mismanagement and waste may pave the way for re-establishing a balance between natural water supply and water demand. The three provinces that share the Lake Urmia basin - East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, and Kurdistan - and the Iranian government have joined forces to devise promising restoration ideas, including stopping dam construction, managing the existing reservoirs and regulating the use of the agricultural lands.

Such changes could augment the lake's inflow, limit additional surface water and groundwater withdrawal, and mitigate salt blowouts and sand storms.

However, this is barely enough for any realistic optimism. Demand-side management plans to reduce the basin's water use must go in effect immediately, and proposals for water transfer - which have had harmful ecological and socio-economic side-effects in other parts of Iran - need drastic revision. There is an obvious need, too, for schemes to compensate current water-users for any losses.

While international help is important, Iranians must lead restoration efforts, for Lake Urmia and other water bodies. Iran's push for development is taking a toll on the nation's water resources in a mostly arid and semi-arid country as short-sighted projects transfer water to supply inefficient agriculture and growing urban areas. Without a pragmatic action plan, the country faces severe water stress.

The authors were all involved in the independent investigation of Lake Urmia. Ali Mirchi is a postdoctoral research associate at the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Michigan Technological University; Kaveh Madani is a lecturer in Environmental Management at the Centre for Environmental Policy, Imperial College London; Amir AghaKouchak is an assistant professor at the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, University of California, Irvine

"Lake Urmia: how Iran's most famous lake is disappearing", 23/01/2015, online at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/jan/23/iran-lake-urmia-drying-up-new-research-scientists-urge-action

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❖ Israeli Forces destroy Palestine Water Infrastructure, 1,000 Meter Water Pipe donated to Yezra

Israeli bulldozers, on Thursday, destroyed a water pipe being used in connecting the West Tubas district's Atoof village with Khirbet Yezra, in the northern Jordan Valley.

Head of Al-Maleh local council, Aaref Daraghmeh, said that the pipe had length of 1,000 meters, and was donated by Agricultural Relief to provide the residents of Yezra with water, since the area has no water sources.

According to the PNN, Dr. Hanna Issa, professor and expert on international law, strongly condemned the action, saying that occupation authorities provide settlers with water, while depriving Palestinians of their own sources.

Settlers in the occupied West Bank reportedly get an unlimited supply of water amounting to about four times more than Palestinians' consumption of water.

Issa added that occupation authorities consume about 80% of the mutual water wells, despite the fact that 80-95% of them are located in Palestinian areas, pointing out that this is water theft, and in contravention of international law.

Issa also stressed that Israel has continuously implemented a policy of displacing Palestinians, separating them from homes near water sources.

Israel also prevents Palestinians from digging wells without military permission, while giving privilege to all illegal settlers.

Issa reiterated that Israel was an occupying power and had no sovereignty to tamper with water sources, according to the fourth Geneva convention.

He also demanded Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian land, according to UN Resolution 242 (1967) and Resolution 338 (1973).

"Israeli Forces destroy Palestine Water Infrastructure, 1,000 Meter Water Pipe donated to Yezra", 31/01/2015, online at: http://www.globalresearch.ca/israeli-forces-destroy-palestine-water-infrastructure-1000-meter-water-pipe-donated-to-yezra/5428529

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❖ Occupation Destroys 1000M Water Pipe Under Construction

Israeli occupation bulldozers on Thursday destroyed water pipe being constructed, which connects Atoof village West Tubas district, with Khirbet Yezra in the northern Jordan valleys.

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Issa also stressed that Israeli occupation had tightened screws on the Palestinians and displaced them from homes near water sources.

Occupation also prevented Palestinians from digging wells without a military permission, while giving privilege to all settlers.

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"Occupation Destroys 1000M Water Pipe Under Construction", 29/01/2015, online at: http://english.pnn.ps/index.php/human-rights/9090-occupation-destroys-1000m-water-pipe-under-construction

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❖ Report accuses Israel of targeting Gaza's water facilities

A little-publicized report released during the final weeks of Israel's summer offensive on the Gaza Strip last year accuses Israel of targeting water and wastewater infrastructure during the 51-day assault, despite having been provided the coordinates of all water and wastewater facilities.

Entitled Water Sector Damage Assessment Report, the paper by the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) meticulously documents $34 million in damages that have caused a humanitarian and environmental crisis throughout the Gaza Strip.

Yet the damage detailed in the report is likely incomplete as the team is unable to assess damage to pipe systems because most of the damage is underground and covered by massive amounts of rubble.

In order to collect the information contained within the report, a team of technicians operated in the field, putting their lives at great risk. Indeed, seven employees were killed while conducting their duties, according to the report.

With virtually all of Gaza's water unfit for consumption, the destruction of infrastructure greatly exacerbates existing problems resulting from eight years of siege and numerous Israeli offensives. About 97% of the water does not meet the World Health Organization (WHO) standards because of chloride and nitrate, according to Mahmoud Ismail, Director of the Palestinian Water Authority. Overpumping of the aquifers have lowered the water level — in some areas it reaches 15 meters below sea level which allows for seawater intrusion into the groundwater aquifer. The mixing of seawater into Gaza's coastal aquifer has left the water unfit for drinking, cooking, or agricultural use.

Yet the residents and farmers of the eastern areas of the Gaza Strip may face an even more grim future. Public officials are concerned that heavy metals and uranium from Israel's bombing campaign may have seeped into the groundwater, contaminating Gaza's main water source for generations to come. Facings these concerns, officials need to take samples to ensure that the water is not affected by weapons, yet they have been unable to thus far. "We are looking for international consultant to enter Gaza to ensure that there is no negative impact from the last war on water resources," Ismail explained.

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Under the Israeli-Egyptian siege, rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure is an impossible task — many basic necessities including small pipes under twelve inches in diameter are banned under the siege, according to Ismail.

Existing infrastructure is choked off by the siege as well. One main that pipes in water sold by the Israeli company Mekorot has not been resumed for unknown reasons, though a physical inspection was conducted that found no leakage on the Gaza side, according to the report.

Beyond that, measures that Israel enforces make it cost-prohibitive to import materials. Checks and security procedures create added costs which are then passed onto the consumers.

Due to fuel shortages resulting from the siege, some water is simply inaccessible. The municipality has standby generators to pump each but no fuel to operate them. Beyond that, the pumps are costly and pollute heavily. "If you have water, maybe you don't have electricity to raise it to the top of the reservoir," Ismail explained.

The report calls for three stages of intervention. The immediate humanitarian intervention, which would have been implemented immediately after the final ceasefire, called for nearly $31 million for urgent humanitarian needs. These needs include reparation of damaged water and wastewater facilities, fuel to operate them, chlorine for water supply disinfection, and provision of water for displaced populations, as well as other urgent needs. The second stage calls for reconstruction of water and wastewater facilities, which is predicted to cost $32 million. The final stage calls for rehabilitation and expansion of the infrastructure throughout the Gaza Strip, which would cost $620 million.

Six months after the publication of the report, little has been done to ease the catastrophic conditions throughout the rubble-covered Gaza Strip. As Israeli warplanes and drones are a near-overhead, another major israeli offensive looms.

"Report accuses Israel of targeting Gaza's water facilities", 28/01/2015, online at: http://mondoweiss.net/2015/01/accuses-targeting-facilities

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❖ Israeli Army Destroys Water Line in Jordan Valley

JORDAN VALLEY, January 29, 2015 (WAFA) – Israeli army Thursday destroyed a water line connecting two villages in the northern Jordan Valley, according to local sources.

Aref Daraghmeh, head of the municipal council of Al-Maleh, told WAFA an Israeli army force accompanied by heavy machinery broke into the area and destroyed a water line connecting between the villages of Atoof and Yerza.

The water line, 1000 meters long, is currently under construction.

The Jordan Valley, which makes up about one-third of the total area of the occupied West Bank, is home to dozens of illegal Israeli settlements and agricultural outposts.

The Valley is part of the West Bank occupied since 1967, which the international community does not recognize as an Israeli territory.

"Israeli Army Destroys Water Line in Jordan Valley", 29/01/2015, online at:
http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=27720

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❖ Japan Grants $100,000 to Bethlehem Water Network Rehabilitation

ETHLEHEM, January 29, 2015 (WAFA) – Japan granted Thursday about $100 thousands in support of the water network rehabilitation project in Za'tara town to the southeast of Bethlehem.

According to a press release issued by the Representative Office of Japan to the Palestinian Authority (PA), Za'tara Municipality would accordingly receive about $101,000 to rehabilitate a 2,570- meter-long old damaged water pipes in 5 locations with 2-inch underground galvanized steel pipes.

The project would benefit around 2,000 residents who are suffering from insecure quality and lack of water, providing them with sufficient supply of clean tap water and contributing to the reduction of water losses.

According to Za'tara Town Profile prepared by the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ), the town's total population in 2007 was 6,280, including 3,215 males and 3,074 females. There are 1,046 households living in 1,080 housing units.

The current 12-kilometer-long water network providing the town with water was established in 1972. About 97.1 percent of the housing units are connected to the water network, 1.3 percent is dependent on rainwater harvesting cisterns and 0.7 percent is dependent on the purchase of water tanks, while the source of water supply is unknown for the remaining units (0.1%).

The quantity of water supplied to Za'tara in 2009 was about 159,615 cubic meters a year; therefore the estimated rate of water supply per capita is about 70 liters a day. However, this amount of water is not consumed by many residents due to water losses which are about 28 percent.

The losses happen at the main source, major transport lines, distribution network, and at the household level, reducing the rate of water consumption per capita to 50 liters per day. This is a low rate compared with the minimum quantity proposed by the World Health Organization, which is 100 liters per capita per day.

Za'tara municipality assumes responsibility for the maintenance of water and collecting bills.

The town is gripped with a water crisis as water supply is water is cut off for long periods of time in summer and winter in several neighborhoods of the town for several reasons, most importantly Israeli domination over Palestinian water resources and high rate of water losses.

Israel dominates Palestinian water resources, limiting the amount of water earmarked for Palestinians, who are supplied with insufficient water quantities to cover their domestic needs. Besides, as a the rate of water losses is high as water network is dilapidated (rickety) and is in need of rehabilitation and renovation.

Moreover, the practices of citizens like creating illegal connections, water theft, and damaging water meters increase the proportion of water losses.

The grant was signed by Representative of Japan to the PA and Ambassador for Palestinian Affairs Junya Matsuura and Mayor of Za'tara Ahmad Rashid at the Representative Office in Ramallah.

This project is funded by the Government of Japan through the Japan's Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects (GGP).

"Japan Grants $100,000 to Bethlehem Water Network Rehabilitation", 29/01/2015, online at: http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=27725

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❖ Al-Sisi, Ethiopia's PM agree on further Renaissance Dam coordination

President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi said Egypt does not oppose Ethiopia's right to development through implementation of projects on the River Nile, in a Thursday meeting with Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn.

Al-Sisi added, however, that there should be consideration of Egypt's water rights, particularly as the river Nile constitutes the only source of the country's water needs.

The meeting came on the sidelines of the 24th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union (AU) in Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Al-Sisi and Desalgen agreed that the solution for the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) issue will be coordinated through a joint commission, according to an official presidential statement by spokesperson.

During his short visit, Al-Sisi also held several bilateral meetings with the presidents of Tunisa, Tunisia, Uganda, Djibouti, South Sudan and the prime minister of Sweden, amongst others.

Al-Sisi travelled to Addis Ababa on 29 January as the AU summit is to conclude Saturday. He had to cut his visit short due to major attacks in North Sinai on Thursday night targeting a number of security building and installations. The attacks claimed the lives of at least 25 police and army personnel, according to state-run newspaper Al-Ahram on Friday.

The GERD has been an issue of contention and tripartite talks between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. The latter two nations have expressed concern over the potential impact the hydroelectric dam could have on their share of vital River Nile water.

The foreign ministers of Egypt and Ethiopia expressed in November mutual recognition for the water rights of each other's nations following the fifth session of the Egyptian-Ethiopian joint committee in Addis Ababa.

In January 2015, Egypt objected to the dam's current of high storage capacity, as studies showed it will affect Egypt's national water security.

Egypt was reinstated to the AU last June, months after being suspended in the wake of former president Mohamed Morsi's ouster, which the AU considered an unconstitutional military coup d'etat.

"Al-Sisi, Ethiopia's PM agree on further Renaissance Dam coordination",31/01/2015, online at: http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2015/01/31/al-sisi-ethiopias-pm-agree-renaissance-dam-coordination/

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❖ Ethiopia aims to soothe Egypt fears over the Nile

Ahead of the upcoming African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's prime minister has sought to soothe Egyptian fears over the potential impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam on the Arab country's share of Nile River water.

In an interview conducted by Egyptian journalistAbdel Latif Elmenawy for Al Tahrir television channel on Wednesday, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn said his country had "no reason" to make "the Egyptian people feel that they are threatened because of the Nile River."

"We say that this is a God-given resource for all of us, and we have to use this resource in both a rational and reasonable way. That both Ethiopia develops and Egyptian people get their safe share to develop from the Nile water," Desalegn said.

"I think we can share this resource without harming each other, without impeding Ethiopian development, without making insecurity in Egypt. We know that it is a bloodline. The Nile is a bloodline to Egypt. To the people of Egypt," Desalegn added.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is expected to fly this week to Ethiopia to attend the African Union summit where he will meet with Prime Minister Desalegn in a rare opportunity for direct talks between the two countries.

Ethiopia - nicknamed "Africa's water tower" - is the source of about 80 percent of Nile water, but Egypt is the most dependent on the river. Cairo fears that Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance dam could cut its share of the water.

The legal framework that governs the management of the Nile is a 1929 treaty between Egypt and colonial Britain and a 1959 treaty between Egypt and Sudan. Ethiopia considers the arrangement to be unfair, because it was not colonized and Britain did not speak on its behalf.

The Ethiopian prime minister said Egypt should not be concerned about the Renaissance dam, saying: "There is a scientific way" of ensuring everyone gets their fair share of the water.

"The filling of the dam is scientifically determined, in what period of time whatever has to be decided."

He said his country has taken an initiative to establish an international panel of experts to study the impact of the dam on countries downstream from the structure, "especially Sudan and Egypt."

He said he believed differences with Cairo could be resolved through dialogue, saying any use of threats on the part of Cairo would be a 'failed strategy,' referring to previous threats made by ousted president Mohammad Morsi.

"The era of the Egyptian leadership during the Muslim Brotherhood - especially president Mursi - was a tough time. A very complicated era, because you know a statesman, in a televised way, threatening Ethiopia that he was going to take military actions against us, which is an open televised statement," the Ethiopian prime minister said.

"It is a failure, when you think to threaten a country militarily, it's from the inception, it is a failed strategy."

'When al Sisi came to power we came to understand that he is a man of sincerity, a man of understanding, and also a man of genuine engagement with countries, with Ethiopia," he added.

"Ethiopia aims to soothe Egypt fears over the Nile", 29/01/2015, online at:
http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2015/01/29/ethiopia-aims-to-soothe-egypt

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❖ China Contributes To Zimbabwe's Irrigation Scheme, Donates Water Pumps

Zimbabwe has received a generous donation of water pumps from China to be used in smaller communities, CCTV Africa reported. The pumps, which will contribute to the country's irrigation planning, will be given to farmers and communities which need them the most. Use of the pumps is expected to improve crop yields and productivity.

"I'm very grateful to the Chinese ambassador and the Chinese government for coming up with this donation," The Honorable Supa Mandiwanzira, a member of parliament told CCTV Africa. "It's going to go a long way in making sure that the community agricultural projects are very successful."

"China Contributes To Zimbabwe's Irrigation Scheme, Donates Water Pumps", 29/01/2015, online at: http://afkinsider.com/86785/china-contributes-to-irrigation-donates-water-pumps/

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❖ Dam diplomacy on the Mekong

The charade over whether to proceed with the Don Sahong Dam, the second Mekong mainstream hydropower project near the Lao-Cambodian border, will soon reach a defining moment. On Wednesday, the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are expected to bring to a close the Mekong River Commission's six-month prior consultation process over the dam. The future of the river balances on what happens next.

The Don Sahong Dam's prior consultation process requires the four countries to carry out a "due diligence" assessment of the dam's effects on the Mekong and cooperate in "good faith" to reach agreement over whether to build the project. Despite the opportunities this presents, the consultation process has been widely viewed as little more than a diplomatic manoeuvre.

Laos made it clear from the start that the Don Sahong Dam would be built and that the process will at best serve to help improve its design. This political manoeuvring to exclude neighbouring countries from the decision to build the project on a river shared by more than 60 million people makes it clear that Laos is not acting in "good faith" and is intent on following the same failed process of the Xayaburi Dam, in which Laos proceeded on a unilateral basis, ignoring the significant concerns raised by its neighbours and their requests for more study. Laos has taken its unilateral decision before necessary baseline and transboundary impact assessments have been carried out.

Meanwhile, the Mekong River Commission, the body assigned to ensure regional cooperation over the Mekong, is going through an existential crisis. The Xayaburi Dam served as the first real test for the commission, and it's widely acknowledged that the body lacked the political will to address the unilateral actions taken by the Lao government. The Don Sahong has now repeated this flawed process, ensuring that confidence in the commission to work for the interests of the Mekong region has reached an all-time low.

The implications of the business-as-usual approach towards the future of the Mekong are chilling. Scientific studies have overwhelmingly demonstrated that a healthy Mekong is irreplaceable, for the region's rich inland fisheries and the food security it provides. Should the cascade of 11 mainstream dams be built, vital fish migration routes of the world's largest inland fisheries would be blocked, along with sediment flows necessary for replenishing nutrients to the region's agriculture, forcing the

region perilously close to a food security calamity. Furthermore, research by Cambodia's Fisheries Administration, WWF and the Australian National University have demonstrated that the protein, micronutrients and calories associated with the river's fisheries cannot easily be replaced.

The Don Sahong would be built across the Mekong's Hou Sahong Channel, the main channel supporting year-round fish migrations. While the Malaysian developer Mega-First Corporation has proposed to re-engineer nearby channels for alternative fish passage, the actual designs and fish-monitoring methods have not been made public, nor has exhaustive testing been carried out, rendering the mitigation proposal risky. With more than 100,000 truckloads of bedrock to be excavated to increase flows into the Hou Sahong Channel, one of the last remaining pools of the critically endangered Irrawaddy dolphins will also likely be wiped out. With the Mekong fisheries and the region's food security at stake, Laos has failed to consider what will happen if the proposed mitigation measures fail.

With such high risks for the Mekong and its people, its clear proceeding with the Don Sahong at this point in time is reckless and irresponsible. The absence of a strong foundation with which to evaluate the transboundary impacts of the project and reach agreement on whether or not to proceed with it, demonstrate that the prior consultation process must be reformed. The four governments should seek to extend the process as they bring forward their respective positions on the dam. With the future of the river lying in the hands of Mekong governments, it's time the four governments act responsibly, end their diplomatic charade and back their rhetoric with action. Construction towards the Don Sahong Dam must be immediately halted and sufficient studies on the project's impacts must be carried out. The burden of proof that the project's impacts will be limited and mitigation measures will succeed must be on the developer. Agreement must then be reached between all four countries and their people before proceeding.

The free reign of Mekong mainstream dam building must end now.

Ame Trandem is the Southeast Asia program director for International Rivers, an NGO working to protect rivers and the rights of communities who depend upon them.

"Dam diplomacy on the Mekong", 26/01/2015, online at: http://www.phnompenhpost.com/analysis-and-op-ed/dam-diplomacy-mekong

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❖ China tipped to top up dried-up Mekong

China has increased the release of water from the Jinghong dam in Yunnan province from 1,040 cubic metres per second daily to 1,100 cubic metres per second daily after several Chinese and Lao cargo vessels...

"China tipped to top up dried-up Mekong", 30/01/2015, online at:
http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/461825/china-tipped-to-top-up-dried-up-mekong

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❖ Malaysian Developer Defends Laos Dam Project

DON SAHONG, LAOS—

Editor's note: Laos is moving ahead with a contentious Don Sahong dam project just a few kilometers above Cambodia, despite misgivings from Mekong River countries and environmental groups. Lao officials maintain they have performed the requisite studies and are sure the environmental and ecological damage from the dam will be manageable. VOA Khmer's Say Mony interviewed Mega First Corporation's senior environmental manager, Peter Hawkins, during a field visit to the project site in December.

You mentioned in your presentation that the Don Sahong dam would have no significant impact on downstream Cambodia and Vietnam and upstream Thailand. But these countries have expressed their concerns over impacts of the dam project you are developing, especially on sediment and fish migration. How would you respond to those concerns?

I've read in the press that people downstream have many concerns. For example, in Vietnam, I read that people are concerned that this project would affect the amount of sediment that is being transported down into the delta, that the project would change the flow pattern in the Mekong River and cause an increase in salinization. And in the past there has been salinity increase in the Mekong Delta. So these are two issues that particularly the Vietnamese press has been publicizing, and they have been relating those to this particular project.

Now, as I have said today, that those concerns are not warranted; they are not real. The reason is this project in the scale of hydro development in this Mekong basin, this project is tiny; it's tiny, very small, compared to other major dams upstream in Laos and particularly in China and I have shown today some data to demonstrate that in the last four years, two Chinese dams have doubled the amount of water that is being stored and available for release.

Now in hydropower reservoir risk assessment, size is almost everything. The bigger the dam, the bigger the reservoir and the more likely this is to trap sediment, the more likely this is to change the water quality. Definitely it will change the flow pattern if you store a very large volume of water.

This project, the storage is called a hedge pond, it's a tiny volume. It's 27,000 cubic meters. Now the storage in the basin is now 46 cubic kilometers of water. So, this is .01 percent of that storage represented by this project.

Those two Chinese dams? They represent 23 cubic kilometers, half the storage in the last four years being added.

I understand that there're concerns, but I think those concerns coming from Vietnam are really about Chinese dams. They're misplaced if they think that this project is causing those problems, salinization or sediment trapping, because it's not. It cannot because it's too small.

There is one concern which has been expressed by the people in Cambodia and by the people in Vietnam about fish passage. And this concern comes from work that was done in the 1990s by Dr. Ian Baird, who actually lived here in this area, downstream from us, at the village called Han Kong. He lived there for five years. And what he did was observe the fishermen, observe what they did, what fish they caught and how they caught them. And he wrote a number of scientific papers about that. And one of the papers that he produced has now got a famous quote in it which says that Hou Sahong is the only passage available all year round for upstream migrating fish. So his argument has been that it's the vital channel for fish migration. And that particular sentence has been taken from his report in 1995 and repeated by many, many other people since then by the press, by the NGOs even by scientists.

My concern was that the data to support that argument was not scientific. There was no data about fish catch, fish passage through the channel. There was no quantitative measurements of how many fish enter Hou Xang Pheuak and this Hou Sadam and how many enter and how many exit.

You need to record the success of fish passage. You need to know how many fish are coming in and how many are going out at the other end.

But people are also criticizing your reports, saying there is no transboundary impact assessment in them.

Well, I have explained the major transboundary impacts, downstream impacts from hydropower project, they have to do with changing water quality, trapping of sediment, changing of flow behavior, displacing people, by downing impacts by releases.

This project does not do any of those things. It's too small. It does not change the flow pattern downstream. It does not trap sediment; it does not change water quality. So those concerns, they're baseless; there's no justification for it. There's ample scientific evidence to support what I'm saying. That leaves one question. Will there be a downstream and upstream impact of fish migration? And I'm trying to answer to that by saying that we are now for the first time collecting evidence; we're collecting the baseline, which is based on rigorous scientific monitoring of fish passage in these channels. And we are seeing that this channel, for example, is quite successful as a fish passage.

Now Ian Baird wrote in 1995 that this passage, Hou Sadam, was an important passage for migrating fish at some time of the year. And that Xang Pheuak, the other channel this project is targeting as a passage to be improved, Ian Baird also wrote, was an important passage at certain time of the year. The question I asked this morning was why?

Why was it important at a certain time of the year and not at the other time?

Now, Ian Baird did not present any data on flow in those channels at the time he was collecting data from the fishermen or listening to their stories. So what I showed you this morning was our simulation of what the flow would have been in the Xam Pheouk and Sahong in those years he was here in 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995. In those years, the water in Xang Pheuak and Sahong were very low in the dry season.

In Xang Pheuak, it was predicted that the daily flow could be less than 10 cubic meters per second. Now, 20 years later, it's a different world. The difference is because of the Chinese dams. Those two major upstream dams which are trapping an additional 23 cubic kilometers of water. They are trapping in the raining season and they are releasing it in the dry season. So, the observation we have now show the daily flow in Xang Pheuak are nearly 10 times. The minimum daily flows that we have now are 10 times what they were when Ian Baird was collecting data from the fishermen. So, we

have water now that was not available before in the dry season. So, Xang Pheuak was a successful fish passage in the wet season and the swallow season but not at the peak in the dry season because it was dry. There's no water for the fish to swim.

But, because of the Chinese dams and because of the other hydropower development as well, don't forget, there has been another 25 percent has been added since Ian Baird's time by dams in Laos, by dams in Thailand. So all of that water together can contribute to the opportunities to improve fish passage in Xang Pheuak without this project doing anything. That water is available now that wasn't there before.

But the project can do other things to improve fish passage. The way that can be done is simple modification of two channels like this one. Slightly deepening of the entrance to increase the flow and looking at the hydraulic conditions of where points of passage that fish are difficult to pass. And modify those conditions to make it easier. These are not difficult things to achieve.

The first thing is the survey to find out where those hydraulic barriers are the modification to the rocks, to the channels to improve the passage.

But, there is another thing as well. And that is human activities. That's the fishermen catching the fish. And in this area, it's the hotspot for fishing. It's very easy to catch migrating fish downstream of these waterfalls during the migration season. And the traps they use are very expensive at the scale of this village, they are quite expensive, but also illegal.

So the company's plan is to provide those fishermen an alternative livelihood, a different way to make money, so that they don't rely on catching fish that are swimming upstream to spawn. These fish are coming upstream to spawn, upstream of Khone falls, and they are going back downstream into Cambodia to hatch and grow into large fish.

Now, this project can have no control over what's happening in Cambodia to those fish during their life cycle. An example is from here about 100 kilometers away you have a dam being constructed as we speak with the Lower Sesan 2. This dam is documented to reduce the productivity of fish in the

basin by 10 percent. There is no information available at all about what the dam developer is doing to improve fish passage around that dam. It would probably be a difficult task. No one knows. It's not available to the Cambodian people. It's not available to us, the developer here.

But you've seen today that we're very free in exchanging information that we are collecting, the methods we are developing and the fish passage technologies that we are employing. So people can see what we are doing and what we intend to do in the future.

The company has given the assurances that it will continue to modify the channels in this area to improve them until the success of fish passage through this area is the same as it was Hou Sahong was operating. And actually the company aims to improve that.

When will the construction of the dam start?

The construction cannot start until the concession agreement between the developer and the government of Laos is signed. And that has not yet happened.

Will it happen early this year?

I do not know. I have some experience working in Laos. And I can tell you that sometimes the processes of the government of Laos are quite slow. They are definitely unpredictable. So I would not assume that I can tell you when they are going to make this decision. But I can tell you that after the decision is made, the construction is expected to last something like four-and-a-half to five years to reach the completion and for the project to start operating.

"Malaysian Developer Defends Laos Dam Project", 28/01/2015, online at:
http://www.voacambodia.com/content/malaysian-developer-defends-laos-dam-project/2616949.html

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❖ We've complied with the Mekong Agreement

Despite Ame Trandem's claims to the contrary, the Lao People's Democratic Republic is committed to cooperating with our neighbour riparian countries in a constructive and mutually beneficial manner to achieve sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin.
We have studied development of a 260-megawatt run-of-river scheme at Don Sahong in the Siphandone region of Laos for eight years.

We have carried out the mandates of the Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA) by submitting this project for notification and later for prior consultation. The notified countries have had more than a year to fully discuss and evaluate the potential impacts of the proposed use.

The Mekong River Commission's expert groups have confirmed that during operation of the dam, there will be no transboundary impacts on water quality and ecosystems, hydrology, sediment balance or freedom of navigation. Turbidity and the possibility of spills during construction can be managed by state-of-the-art engineering practices.

We recognise there is much concern about fish migration. Scientists, local community and Don Sahong staff continue to compile data on the various aquatic species that migrate through the area. As you are aware, they have been widening and deepening channels adjacent to Don Sahong, and removing natural and man-made barriers. This work on "natural fish passages" virtually assures that fish will migrate through the area year-round. Over time, any impediments to migration that are detected can be corrected. With proper conservation of wild stock and development of fish farms, there will be more fish, not less fish.

The Lao PDR understands the call for assessment of transborder impacts and migratory fish behaviour beyond our borders. While this is not the responsibility of the project, the Lao PDR is delighted to collaborate with the MRC in setting up a task force to undertake this work. If member countries want comprehensive studies of fish migration from the Mekong Delta and Tonle Sap, to and from the 3-S (the Sesan, Srepok and Sekong rivers) and upstream reaches, we are also delighted to cooperate with the MRC in pursuing these studies as well.

We heartfully appreciate the constructive criticism and informed comments we have received as a result of the PNPCA. All legitimate concerns will be addressed and, as warranted, applied in mitigating potential impacts.

The Lao government has duly complied with our obligations under the 1995 Mekong Agreement.

Having concluded the prior consultation process in accordance with the Mekong Agreement, the Lao government has already informed member countries that it will proceed with plans to develop the project for the benefit of the Lao people.

We appreciate the participation of those civil society groups that have offered constructive input to improve the project. Sadly, some NGOs – including International Rivers and WWF – chose to boycott the prior consultation process and urged others to join them. They have attempted to divide member countries against one another and destroy cooperation between the countries, but they have failed.

Once again, we reiterate our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to all member countries, development partners and international organisations for having supported the Lao PDR's plans to develop, protect and manage natural resources within our territory.

Together, we will move forward in a responsible and sustainable manner for the social and economic well being of the Lao people, thus, contributing to the prosperity to the Mekong subregion.

Dr Daovong Phonekeo is the director general for the Department of Energy Policy and Planning for the Lao Ministry of Energy and Mines.

"We've complied with the Mekong Agreement", 29/01/2015, online at: http://www.phnompenhpost.com/analysis-and-op-ed/weve-complied-mekong-agreement

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❖ Vietnam, riparian neighbors exert pressure on Laos over second Mekong dam

A man fishing in the Khone Falls area, near the site of the Don Sahong dam project. Laos's steadfast determination to forge ahead with construction of the Don Sahong, the second of 11 dams planned by the landlocked nation on the lower reaches of the Mekong River, has pitted it against its riparian neighbors. Photo credit: International Rivers

Plans for the second dam across the lower Mekong River continue to put Laos on a collision course with its neighbors and environmentalists who fear a damning frenzy would sabotage the livelihoods, fish species and farmland of around 60 million people.

The landlocked nation seems determined to defy international pressure and forge ahead with construction of the Don Sahong, the second of 11 dams planned by Laos on the lower reaches of the 4,900-kilometer (3,045-mile)-long Mekong, which is second only to the Amazon in terms of biodiversity. The 11 dams are expected to generate eight percent of Southeast Asia's power by 2025.

The four countries that share the lower stretches of the Mekong -- Vietnam, Laos Thailand, and Cambodia -- were yet again at odds at a meeting Wednesday over the prior consultation (e.g. regional decision-making) process of the 260-megawatt (MW) dam project.

“We are pleased to bring the prior consultation process on the project to a close,” Laos said in a statement at the meeting.

But Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia bristled at this position, demand that further studies on the trans-boundary impacts of the dam be conducted before it goes ahead.

“Outcomes of **national consultations** as well as additional studies carried out by Vietnamese experts all come to the same conclusion that there [remains the lack of] a lot of necessary information,” the Vietnamese delegation said in its statement, calling for extending the consultation process until the end of this year.

Given that stumbling block, the Mekong River Commission -- a regional body established to coordinate dam projects on the river -- said the issue would be handled at ministerial level at a yet-to-be-announced date.

Environmental groups acknowledge the legitimate concerns of Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia.

"The requests…to extend the prior consultation for the Don Sahong dam is not unreasonable given the significant knowledge gaps that still exist and the high level of risk that the project's proposed mitigation measures carry should they fail," said Ame Trandem, Southeast Asia program director for International Rivers, a California-based group.

"As cooperation is a two-way process, Laos has the moral imperative to comply with neighboring requests," she said.

'At it again'

Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand are bound by a 1995 Mekong treaty that requires each signatory to hold inter-governmental consultations before damming the river. But no single country has veto powers and Laos will have the final say on whether or not to proceed.

Since September 2013, when Laos announced that it would embark on the Don Sahong project, different interpretations of the treaty have already pitted Laos against its riparian neighbors.

Laos has maintained that it needs to only notify its neighbors of its intent to build the dam because it is located neither on a tributary nor the mainstream of the Mekong. Its downstream neighbors, however, have demanded that the consultation process take place before the dam is built, citing its trans-boundary impacts.

Site visits by environmental groups have confirmed that preparatory construction works towards the Don Sahong have got underway since last year.

Environmental groups warn that the dam, slated to be built at a site less than two kilometers from the Cambodian border, threatens to block the only channel that currently allows year-round fish migrations on a large scale.

Many insist the dam will certainly wipe out one of the last populations of endangered Irrawaddy dolphins. The Don Sahong and another Lao dam slated for the Mekong leave the future of the mighty Mekong **hanging in the balance,** they say.

In November 2012, Laos broke ground on the US$3.8-billion 1,260-megawatt**Xayaburi** dam project despite vehement objections from environmental groups and neighboring governments who said the 810-meter (2,600ft) dam would unleash massive ecological changes on a river that feeds around 60 million people. The project is more or less half way complete with the second stage set to begin this month, according to Lao officials.

Opponents of the Xayaburi and Don Sahong projects said their commencement would usher in the construction of the 9 other dams planned by Laos on the Mekong, which begins in the Tibetan plateau and flows through China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam before emptying into the East Sea (internationally known as the South China Sea).

At the time Laos went ahead with construction of the Xayaburi dam, it also insisted that the prior consultation process on the project was already over, which drew sharp criticism from three other Mekong nations. Since then, the four countries have failed to agree on whether or not the process is still ongoing.

"The failure to reach consensus was interpreted by Laos as a green light to unilaterally move ahead," said Trinh Le Nguyen, executive director of People and Nature Reconciliation, one of Vietnam's few locally-based conservation.

"Laos appears to be at it again with the Don Sahong," Nguyen told *Thanh Nien News.*

The landlocked nation plans to become the "battery of Southeast Asia" by exporting the vast majority of its power -- mostly to Thailand. It is already committed to supplying 7,000 MW to Thailand, 5,000 MW to Vietnam, and 1,500 MW to Cambodia by 2015.

Lao officials have identified hydropower development as the linchpin of the economy.

"For Laos, any dam is very important, because Laos has no other options to improve its economy," Daovong Phonekeo, director-general of Laos' Department of Energy Policy and Planning, was quoted by Voice of America news site as saying on January 19.

"Our only option is to develop hydropower," he said.

Race to the bottom

Analysts say it is clear that the Don Sahong's negative effects downstream far outweigh the limited energy benefits that the dam would bring. But on the other hand, if the dam-building spree rolls out on the Mekong, the buck would not stop only with Laos, the analysts say.

Thailand does have a big share of the responsibility as its demand for power is the main driver for hydropower construction on the mainstream. Although in the Don Sahong case Thailand may not be the buyer of the electricity, Xayaburi dam paved the way for it, and this is a Thai project more than a Lao one.

Thailand is set to buy about 95 percent of the power generated by the Xayaburi dam and three Thai firms have a stake in the project. In addition, several Thai banks are financing the work.

Meanwhile, Cambodia and Vietnam are also looking to build their own dams on the Mekong tributaries.

"Laos can point to these facts as examples of hypocrisy when other countries criticize its behavior, which limits the ability to constructively discuss how to equalize benefits and consequences in a way that will benefit the region as a whole," Courtney Weatherby, a Southeast Asia Program research associate at the Washington-based Stimson Center, told *Thanh Nien News*.

In the meantime, China's upstream dams continue to cause worries due to the lack of information about the way the water is moving, development plans, cumulative environmental impacts, and trans-boundary impacts. China has constructed or planned to build a total of 13 dams on the cascade.

At the end of the day, analysts say that if national interests continue to prevail, they will set off a race to the bottom in terms of standards set for sustainable use of the natural resources of the Mekong.

"Downstream countries have the most to lose from mismanagement of the resources, and thus Vietnam is the most exposed," said Marc Goichot, who works for environmental group WWF's Greater Mekong program on sustainable hydropower.

A number of studies and scientists have pointed out that Vietnam's Mekong Delta communities all face imminent risks of sinking and shrinking. There are already clear signs that the Delta is very vulnerable to reduction of sediment delivery from the Mekong.

"Xayaburi and Don Sahong dams are challenging the ecosystem integrity of the Mekong. It is also a big challenge to the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations ASEAN] integration agenda," Goichot said.

"Vietnam, riparian neighbors exert pressure on Laos over second Mekong dam", 29/01/2015, online at: http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/vietnam-riparian-neighbors-exert-pressure-on-laos-over-second-mekong-dam-38181.html

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❖ Mekong River Commission to Consider Lao Don Sahong Dam at Ministerial Level

An intergovernmental body which supervises development along the Mekong River on Wednesday referred a decision on the much-criticized Don Sahong Dam in Laos to the ministerial level after Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam were unable to agree on how to proceed with the project.

The Joint Committee of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), whose members consist of the four nations, held a special session in the Lao capital Vientiane to discuss Prior Consultation for the 260-megawatt dam, during which Laos informed its neighbors that the process was complete.

Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, however, called for an extension of the process until further studies and additional consultation could be carried out on the controversial dam, being built by Malaysia's Mega First Corporation Berhad (Mega First) on Southeast Asia's key artery the Mekong River, just two kilometers (1.2 miles) north of Cambodia.

"Based on the differing views of its members, the Joint Committee decided to refer the matter to the MRC Council, the highest MRC governance body which consists of water and environment ministers from the four Member Countries," the MRC said in a statement following the meeting.

Lao authorities decided in June to open the dam to consultations among members of the MRC and regional public, and pledged to suspend construction of the project, though Mega First has said work is continuing on secondary infrastructure, including roads and bridges.

Global environmental group International Rivers on Wednesday welcomed the call from Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam to extend the process and urged Laos to shut down all construction on the Don Sahong.

"The requests made by Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam to extend the prior consultation for the Don Sahong Dam is not unreasonable given the significant knowledge gaps that still exist and the high level of risk that the project's proposed mitigation measures carry should they fail," the group's

Southeast Asia program director Ame Trandem said in a statement.

"As cooperation is a two-way process, Laos has the moral imperative to comply with neighboring requests. With the dispute between all four Mekong countries ongoing, it is absolutely essential that all construction activities are halted immediately and that staff and equipment are withdrawn from the site."

According to International Rivers, the official July 25 start date for the consultation process was only decided upon by MRC members at the beginning of October when the process was nearly halfway over.

And concerns raised by a number of participants during a December public consultation meeting consisting of civil society, nongovernmental and governmental organizations, and regional and international organizations in Pakse appear to have been disregarded by Laos, including calls to scrap the project altogether.

The Don Sahong has sparked widespread concern among neighboring countries and environmentalists who say that it will block migratory fish routes, negatively affecting nutrition and livelihoods across regional boundaries, and destroy endangered ecosystems.

"In the case of the Don Sahong Dam, the risks to regional fisheries, to the Irrawaddy dolphins, and to the livelihoods and food security of millions of people go beyond the borders of Laos," Trandem said.

"With such risks and high stakes for the Mekong, the Don Sahong Dam should not be built."

Online survey

Ahead of Wednesday's Joint Committee session, environmental group Vietnam Rivers Network (VRN) released a statement which said that in an online survey it conducted from Nov. 13 to Jan. 15, only 26 out of 1,196 scientists and residents of the Mekong Delta supported construction of the Don

Sahong.

Conducted in collaboration with the Green Innovation and Development Center and the Southwest Steering Committee, the survey also found that all respondents in the 13 provinces of Vietnam that surround the Mekong Delta were in opposition to the project.

It marked the first time residents of the Mekong Delta had participated in a survey on a project in Laos, and VRN said respondents were concerned the Don Sahong and other Mekong dams would deposit more alluvium in their fields and aquatic crops, in addition to causing landslides and seawater intrusion.

They proposed that the Vietnamese government work with the authorities of Laos to stop the construction of Don Sahong or delay it to allow time to deal with the challenges, as well as to find solutions to developing clean energy that could replace hydropower plants.

Despite the myriad concerns over the project, Daovieng Phonekeo, deputy director general of the Lao Department of Electricity, told RFA's Lao Service last month that full-scale construction of the dam would begin shortly after the end of the consultation process.

Xayaburi Dam

Meanwhile, a network representing residents of eight Thai Mekong riparian provinces called on officials in Thailand's capital Bangkok to protect their livelihoods as the U.S. $3.5 billion Xayaburi Dam—the first project Laos is building on the Mekong—reached its halfway point of construction.

In a statement issued on Monday, the Thai People's Network in Eight Mekong Provinces noted that Thailand has been one of the main drivers behind the dam, as it is building and financing it and planning to purchase the bulk of its electricity, but the project's impact on the country has not been fully studied and plans to facilitate fish migration have not been made public.

It added that a lawsuit filed in a Thai court by local villagers remains pending which alleges that a

power purchase agreement signed between the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and the Xayaburi electricity generating company in Laos is illegal, approved without an assessment of the project's environmental and health impacts and without consultations in Thailand.

A villager from northeastern Thailand's Nongkhai province told RFA's Lao Service that as construction has progressed on the Xayaburi, the flow of the Mekong has become irregular and is seriously affecting the lives of riparian residents.

"These days, the water is so murky that fishermen rarely catch fish, while the rapid decrease of water levels and quality is affecting our pumps," the villager said, adding that residents fear farming the lower banks of the Mekong because they believe the river will flood in the dry season, as it did last year.

"If the Xayaburi Dam begins generating power, the farmers will surely be impacted."

Laos challenged the Prior Consultation process in late 2012 when it went ahead with the Xayaburi, despite protests from Vietnam and Cambodia over unresolved questions about its transboundary impact on important catch fisheries and sediment flow.

"Mekong River Commission to Consider Lao Don Sahong Dam at Ministerial Level", 28/01/2015, online at: http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/mrc-01282015155925.html

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❖ Itau Raises $408 Million for Renewable Energy Projects

(Bloomberg) -- The Brazilian bank Itau Unibanco Holding SA raised 1.05 billion reais ($408 million) to finance renewable-energy and water-treatment projects.

That's the most ever raised for renewable energy in Latin America by a Brazilian bank, the Sao Paulo-based lender said in an e-mailed statement Tuesday. The funding includes a five-year, 262 million-real loan from International Finance Corp. and a three-year, 787 million-real loan from Bank of America Corp., Mizuho Bank Ltd. and Commerzbank AG.

"There is a big demand for financing renewable energy projects in Brazil," Carolina Amaral Camargo, head of international financial institutions at the bank's Itau BBA unit, said in a telephone interview. "We already have a big pipeline of operations being analyzed by the bank and we are going to diversify the financing line for many companies."

Banks in Brazil may increase their financing for clean power as President Dilma Rousseff pursues policies to reduce debt and control inflation and the national development bank BNDES pulls back, according to Marcelo Girao, head of energy for project finance at Itau BBA.

"BNDES is slowing down in some types of loans, so the development bank has to find alternatives with other banks," Girao said in an interview in Sao Paulo this month. "Commercial banks will have more exposure to renewable projects, such as wind parks."

Bank of America, for example, has set a goal of $50 billion for green initiatives in the next 10 years, according to the statement.

Brazil's monetary council, which includes the finance minister and central bank president, raised the benchmark interest rate for loans provided by BNDES to 5.5 percent starting Jan. 1, from 5 percent.

Girao estimated that as much as 30 percent of long-term loans approved in the next few years by the development bank, Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Economico & Social, will come through private banks, a strategy aimed at "risk diversification."

"Itau Raises $408 Million for Renewable Energy Projects", 27/01/2015, online at: http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-27/itau-raises-408-million-for-renewable-energy-and-water-projects?utm_source=Circle+of+Blue+WaterNews+%26+Alerts&utm_campaign=d6a3a20590-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c1265b6ed7-d6a3a20590-250657169

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❖ OPINION: The Future of Wetlands, the Future of Waterbirds – an Intercontinental Connection

BONN, Jan 31 2015 (IPS) - The first global treaty dealing with biodiversity was the Ramsar Convention – predating the Rio processes by 20 years.

Ramsar aims to conserve wetlands, the usefulness of which has been undervalued – even the eminent French naturalist of the 18th century, the Comte de Buffon, advocated their destruction – and which have suffered large losses in recent decades.

Far from being wastelands, wetlands provide invaluable services, replenishing aquifers that supply drinking water and filtering out harmful pollutants. By maintaining a healthy environment, wetlands help ensure human well-being.

While the Ramsar Convention has had to deal with a broader spectrum of wetland issues over the years, it should be remembered that its full title includes "especially as waterfowl habitat", and in AEWA, Ramsar has a strong ally with a clear focus on waterbird conservation in the African-Eurasian Flyway.

The areas designated as Ramsar Sites form an important part of the network of breeding, feeding and stopover grounds that are indispensable to the survival of the 255 bird populations of listed under AEWA.

Ramsar Sites are vital "hubs" in the network of habitats that constitute the African-Eurasian flyway along which millions of birds migrate in the course of the annual cycle. They include habitats as diverse as the Wadden Sea in Europe and the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania, both also designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites and important staging posts for birds migrating between Arctic breeding grounds and wintering sites deep in Africa.

Despite being often far apart geographically and different morphologically, these sites are inextricably linked by the birds that frequent them.

The definition of "wetland" extends to fish ponds, rice paddies, saltpans and some shallow marine waters, so Ramsar has sites of significance to other species covered by the Convention of Migratory Species, under which AEWA was concluded.

Examples are the Franciscana dolphin (the only dolphin species to inhabit wetlands) found in the estuary of the River Plate and along the coast of South America; and the European eel – a recent addition to the CMS listings – which spends most of its life in rivers but spawns and then dies in the Sargasso Sea.

But it is waterbirds that have the strongest links to wetlands and the future of many species is in doubt as a result of the continuing reduction in area of these most productive of habitats. Of great concern is the fate of the mudflats of the Yellow Sea which are under increasing pressure from human developments because tied to them is the fate of a number of threatened shorebirds.

Lake Natron in the United Republic of Tanzania is the only regular breeding site of over two million Lesser flamingoes. Applications have been made to exploit the area's deposits of soda ash leading to fears that irrevocable damage would be done to the site resulting in the species' extinction.

The habitats of Andean flamingoes – the Puna and Andean Flamingoes – are facing similar problems as illegal mining activities have eroded the nesting sites and contaminated the water, exacerbating other threats such as egg collection.

Fragile wetland ecosystems also fall victim to man-made accidents – the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico and the Sandoz chemical works fire in Basel, Switzerland in 1986 being just two examples of countless incidents, both leading to the death of thousands of birds and fish.

Wetlands are vital for birds – and especially waterbirds – but it is also the case that the birds are vital to the wetlands, playing a major role in maintaining nature's balance.

Government representatives will gather in Paris later this year in the latest effort to seek agreement on the steps necessary to arrest the causes of climate change. Wildlife is already feeling the effects and one of the best ways to ensure that animals can adapt is to ensure that there are enough robust sites providing the habitat and food sources at the right time and in the right place.

The theme chosen by the Ramsar Convention for this year's campaign is Wetlands for Our Future and there is a particular emphasis being placed on the role of young people. While wetlands are of

course vital for humans, they are no less important for the survival of wildlife and to a great extent also depend on the birds that live in them.

It is the role of AEWA to provide a forum where the countries of Europe, West Asia and Africa can work together to maintain the network of sites making up the African-Eurasian flyway.

"OPINION: The Future of Wetlands, the Future of Waterbirds – an Intercontinental Connection",31/01/2015, online at: http://www.ipsnews.net/2015/01/opinion-the-future-of-wetlands-the-future-of-waterbirds-an-intercontinental-connection/?utm_source=Circle+of+Blue+WaterNews+%26+Alerts&utm_campaign=4968e5a930-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c1265b6ed7-4968e5a930-250657169

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