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ENVIRONMENT-CAMBODIA: Opting For The Big Dam

By Andrew Nette

PHNOM PENH, Jan 1 (IPS) - It has been a long held plan of Cambodia's government - a hydropower dam on the mainstream of the Mekong River in the central part of the country.

But political and financial considerations coupled with considerable environmental and social consequences have combined to prevent the project from going ahead.

Until, it appears, now.

In a move that will fuel concerns about hydropower development on the mainstream of the Mekong, Phnom Penh is moving ahead with a dam that would block the entire width of the river at Sambor, Kratie province, in central Cambodia.

A memorandum of understanding signed in late 2006 between the Cambodian government and China Southern Power Grid Company to study the project's feasibility considered two configurations.

The first a 2,600 Mw run-of- river dam barraging the entire width of the Mekong, is a variation on the original scheme proposed by the then Mekong Secretariat in 1994 for a 3,300Mw structure blocking the entire river. This would have created an estimated 880 square kilometre reservoir and necessitated the relocation of over 5,000 people - a figure many believe would be higher now.

A second, smaller design envisaged a 465 Mw project blocking only part of the river, necessitating only a six sq km reservoir.

Although no official information has been released about the feasibility study, several informed sources in Phnom Penh claim the Cambodia government has already made an in-principle decision to press ahead with the larger configuration.

In a presentation to a conference in Laos in September 2008, Tung Sereyvuth, deputy director of energy development for the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy (MIME), the body overseeing Cambodia's hydropower development, said the government is looking at a 2,600 Mw dam, which it hopes to have on line by 2019.

In an interview in mid-2008, Ith Praing, Secretary of State for MIME said that environmental impact assessments for the Sambor were already underway. "We hope that it [the dam] will be workable. The dam will be a historic achievement as the first big dam in Cambodia."

Despite this, Puth Sorithy, director of the EIA department of Ministry of Environment told a dam-affected people's conference in Phnom Penh in early December that he is yet to see any of the paper work relating to the Sambor.

Officials from MIME did not respond to requests for comment on the status of the project.

Fisheries experts and critics of Mekong mainstream hydropower development are scathing of the dam's potential impacts.

"If built, the dam would block major fish migrations between southern Laos and Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake, destroy critical deep pool fish habitats, and interrupt the rivers hydrological, sediment and nutrient cycles, impacting the river's wider ecology," said Carl Middleton, a Bangkok-based research analyst with Rivers International.

A study undertaken by the Mekong Secretariat in 1994 on the impacts of the 3,300 Mw option said it would block fish migration. It said isolating fish stocks from historical spawning and rearing areas will have effects far upstream to perhaps Pakse [in southern Laos] and beyond, and on the Great Lake [Tonle Sap] fishery.

The Tonle Sap contributes almost two thirds of Cambodia's annual fish catch, largely comprising migratory fish species.

A paper presented to the 6th Technical Symposium on Mekong Fisheries in Vientiane, Laos in 2003 was even blunter. "Any dam on the Mekong mainstream in this part of Cambodia could be disastrous for fisheries, but this site [Sambor] is the worst possible location."

The World Conservation Union has also identified the Sambor dam as a serious threat to the habitat of the endangered freshwater Irrawaddy dolphin. The stretch of the river between Kratie and the Lao-Cambodian border, important in terms of deep pool habitats along the Mekong, is a crucial dry season refuge for the dolphin.

The idea of dams on the Mekong mainstream has crept back on to the agenda in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia due to such factors as higher petroleum prices and the increased availability of financing from the private sector and new industry players such as China, Vietnam and South Korea.

In early 2008, Laos signed an agreement with a Malaysian Engineering firm for a dam on the Mekong mainstream at a location known as Khone Falls, where the river forms a complex network of narrow channels at the point at which it flows into Cambodia.

The dam, the subject of considerable local and international controversy, would block the deepest channel on that section of the river and one that migratory fish can easily pass through at the peak of the April-May dry



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season, when the Mekong's water level is at its lowest.

This will effectively block the dry season migration of fish between the feeding habitats of the Tonle Sap Lake and upstream breeding zones in Laos and Thailand.

"From the government's point of view, neighbouring countries are developing mainstream dams," said Nye San, deputy director of NGO Forum in Phnom Penh. "Their argument is why should we [Cambodia] miss out,"

The lack of information about the Sambor project is not unusual. Cambodia has released little information publicly about any of its planned hydropower projects. Local people who stand to be directly affected are also told little.

"Villagers I know have seen Chinese and Khmer engineers drilling from boats to check the bottom of the Mekong River," said A. Tan, a fisherman from Sambor district whose village is eight km from the proposed dam site.

"We know the dam will be built but we have no information. No local authorities have shown us documents to help us understand this issue," Tan added.

The Mekong River Commission (MRC), the body charged with monitoring development in Mekong basin is also unclear about Sambor's status. "It [the Sambor] is not at the stage where notification procedures would kick in," said Jeremy Bird, the Commission's head.

"We have been discussing with the Cambodian National Mekong Committee for them to provide us with the same preliminary information we have got from Laos about Don Sahong and they have agreed."

"This will give us an indication of the scale of the process and the time line for the project."

None of the proposed mainstream dams have reached the point in their development where they trigger notification under the MRC's guidelines for managing the river's water resources, added Bird. "I expect the first to be notified in the first six months of 2009," he said.

The Sambor project is part of a major push by Cambodia to develop hydropower potential for internal use and export to neighbouring countries. Only 20 percent of Cambodian households currently have access to reliable electricity supply, a figure the government wants to raise to 70 percent by 2030.

According to the government unreliable power supply and high power prices by regional standards are significant obstacles in attracting foreign investment. Five dams are currently under construction and over 20 are being studied in partnership with private companies, mostly Chinese.

While observers agree steps need to be taken to improve Cambodia's access to power, not all agree that hydropower is the best option.

"Rather than building destructive dams such as the Sambor, there are better ways for Cambodia to meet its energy needs," said Middleton. "National energy policies should prioritise introducing innovative renewable and decentralised electricity technologies that are now available and cost competitive."

As was the case in Laos in the mid-nineties, when the regional economic slowdown saw many dam projects delayed or abandoned, the current global economic situation could adversely impact Cambodia's hydropower plans.

"If there is an effect on the United States and Europe, it should also effect China and this might slow down dam building in our country," said NGO Forum's San.

"Overall, it is too early to tell what impacts the global economic downturn is going to have, including access to finance," said Middleton

"Recent figures point towards significantly reduced rates of growth of electricity demand in Thailand and Vietnam, the Mekong's largest electricity consumers. As happened in the mid-1990s this could result in large dam projects being delayed or even cancelled."

"The current drop in oil prices does, however, make hydropower less competitive compared to other electricity sources," Middleton said.

(END/2008)

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