

Philippines

Dam The Rivers, Damn The People

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Baguio City, Philippines — The Philippine government's biggest flagship project costing 1.9 billion dollars in loans will submerge more than 20,000 hectares of farmlands, displace 30,000 indigenous peoples in the province of Benguet and flood 1.5 million people in Region 1 and Central Luzon.

Named San Roque dam after the town where it is located, the project is the biggest hydroelectric power plant in Southeast Asia; the third biggest in all Asia after the Twin Rivers dam of Yangtze River in China and the Narmada dam in India; and, the ninth largest in the world. Measuring 187 meters high, it is expected to generate 345 megawatts (MW) of hydroelectric power for this country which is in dire need of electricity. Power generated from San Roque will be channeled to the national grid to provide electrification particularly in the island of Luzon. It is also expected to irrigate 87,000 hectares of riceland.

With an annual electricity demand growth rate of 9 percent, the Philippines needs additional 7,400 MW or 7.4 gigawatts (GW) for its fast-expanding industrial, commercial and residential sectors. The current installed electrical capacity, according to the National Power Corporation (NPC), is 11,305 MW or 11.3 GW. Twenty percent of this or 2,261 MW is supplied by hydroelectric dams.

Although many countries have stopped building megadams because of environmental and social costs, the Philippines is one of the few which is pursuing such infrastructure. This is mainly because 47 percent of its current installed electrical supply is provided by oil-based power plants. The government wants to reduce oil imports and retire the oil-fired plants as these drain much of the national coffers. With only 4,000 barrels per day of oil production, it imports 339,000 barrels per day to meet its daily consumption of 343,000 barrels per day. Coal-fired plants supply 15 percent of the total electricity output, and 38 percent from geothermal plants.

In 1996-97, the country was gripped by continuous power failures. Droughts brought about by El Nino resulted in low water levels of dams, thereby failing to generate hydroelectric power. The government did not only spend much on its bunker-oil-fired plants, but also lost foreign investors disgruntled by the consistent power failures.

Thus, it is no surprise why the government is bent on pushing on with building the San Roque even with perceived social and environmental risks.

According to Joan Carling of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA), an NGO leading a fight against the dam, "The dam will forever wipe out not only 30,000 people but more so the peoples' land, culture and livelihoods.

These people, called Ibalois, have already been displaced once when the Ambuklao dam was constructed in Benguet in 1954. They are a distinct tribe with their own traditional socio-political institutions, traditions and values. They rely mainly on agriculture for their everyday subsistence. The construction of the dam spells their very doom."

But not only are the Ibalois endangered by the dam. Jeanette Ribaya of the Tungtungan Ti Umili, an NGO advocating rights of indigenous peoples, said "some 1.5 million people in the provinces of Tarlac, Pangasinan and Nueva Ecija, are in danger of being flooded if and when the dam either breaks or overflows, a possibility raised by technical dam experts."



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An independent assessment panel made of geologists, engineers and hydrologists commissioned by the US-based International Rivers Network (IRN) and Friends of the Earth (FOE) in November last year bared its findings to the public that “the San Roque dam is prone to earthquakes and could exacerbate-rather than alleviate-flooding. Worse, losing the whole dam is conceivable”, said hydrologist Dr. Peter Wiling who headed the investigation panel.

The panel said “for the Philippine government to insist on completing the dam is asking those below the dam to develop a false sense of security. The dam was designed to contain relatively small floods expected to occur once every five years but it cannot contain larger floods which are expected to be devastating when the five year magnitude of flood arrives,” Dr. Wiling said.

Also, “the dam has not been designed to withstand the highest possible earthquake. An earthquake can, altogether cause the dam to break,” warned Dr. Tiziano Grifoni of the assessment panel. Benguet happens to lie along the Digidig fault. In 1990, a killer earthquake with a magnitude of 6.7 on the Richter scale killed nearly 1,000 and injured 5,000 people in the province of Benguet, Pangasinan and Nueva Ecija.

Dr. Sergio Feld, another member, said that the dam has all the potential of becoming a tailings dam of silt and sedimentation from mines operating in the province of Benguet. Because earlier environmental impact assessment studies on sedimentation rates were unreliable and underestimated, the life span of San Roque could be cut from 35 to 65 percent, Feld said.

Accumulated sediment would then aggravate the likelihood and severity of flooding on the river banks upstream of the reservoir. As the mining wastes accumulate, the impounded waters will have heavy concentration of dissolved chemical constituents, most of which are deadly, like mercury, lead, selenium, molybdenum, iron, manganese, zinc, arsenic, copper and nickel. All are by-products of mining and can adversely affect water quality, Feld stressed. The reservoir, being a collecting point of cyanide compounds, uranium and other radioactive materials will prove disastrous to people and animals living downstream, he warned.

In response to the panel’s findings, the National Power Corporation (NPC) refuted all the findings saying “appropriate environmental impact assessment (EIA) activities were carried out by appropriate authorities from reputable agencies. Technically competent experts did geological and hydrological studies.” NPC particularly refuted the independent panel’s allegations that the dam will serve as reservoir for dangerous chemicals.

The government and the many supporters of the dam dispute the bleak predictions. President Joseph Estrada said “the government will not abandon the project because it will provide his administration and investors in the project an opportunity to demonstrate to the whole world its capability to implement public infrastructure projects of massive size and scope in an environmentally and socially responsible way.”

“The irrigation component of the dam is expected to generate thousands of jobs. I consider this vital because it is in line with the government’s thrust on food security and improved production,” he added.

Raymund Cunningham, senior vice president of the San Roque Project said “the people will soon realize that the dam is more of a boon than a bane.” With Phase 1 nearly completed, the government is not backing out. “Much has been spent already, the dam has to be built,” John Lockwood, resident manager of the project said.

But Benguet residents, particularly those from Itogon won’t take the statements sitting down. The Shalupirip Santhanay Indigenous Peoples’ Movement (SSIPM), an organization of indigenous peoples who are adversely affected by the dam are actively gaining support from local government officials and the public for their fight against the dam. SSIPM chairperson Pascual Pocding said “we will continue to fight for the stoppage of the dam because it threatens not only us but our children as well.”

Benguet Provincial Board member Marvin Atos echoed similar sentiments, “when we lived in Ambuklao, they dammed it and drove us away. We went to Binga. Again they dammed it and we left. Today, we are being told once more to abandon our lands.”