

## Vietnam

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**H**o Chi Minh City, Vietnam- The ancient Chinese adage of “Do not give a man fish, but teach him how to fish” is becoming untrue in many parts of the 4,500 km long Mekong river today.

That is because there are less fish to catch. In fact, more than 5,000 people marched in Thailand and Laos in 1998 to protest the giant hydroelectric dams which they say are not benefiting them.

But it is not only fish that trouble the waters of the Mekong river today. The waters themselves pose the greatest potential for provoking conflict among China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The threat of these nations going to war because of water may become real in the future if there are no new guarantees of cooperation which offset the distinct advantage of the upstream countries over its downstream neighbors.

Consider this: The Mekong river, which originates from the icy plateaus of Qinghai western China and which flows through Tibet to Yunan, China to the Mekong delta in Vietnam, supports the agricultural and economic life of some 30 million Chinese and 150 million people in the downstream countries. The people depend on the river and its tributaries for food, water, transport and social activities. The rivers' annual flood drought cycles are essential for the sustainable production of food crops along the banks of the river during the dry season.

But all is not well in Mekong today.

Along the river's stretch, which is the tenth longest river in the world and the heart and soul of mainland Southeast Asia, China is completing two large dams even as five more are in progress. These reservoirs will hold back more than 50 percent of the 90 billion cubic meters (bcm) of water volume that China normally discharges to the Mekong river through Laos.

Laos has already constructed four of targeted 23 dams. Their reservoirs would hold back 73 percent of the total bcm annual volume that Laos contributes to the Mekong.

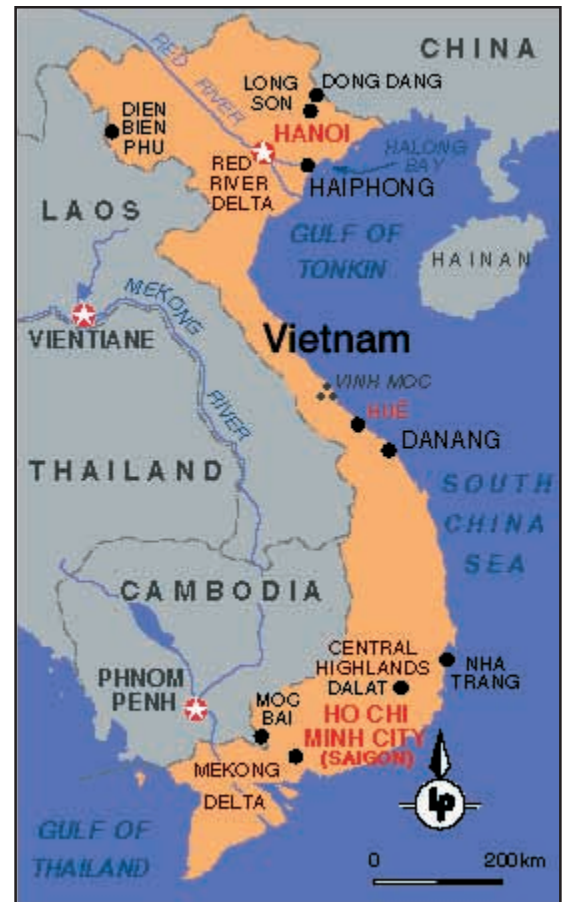
And, Thailand, even with only four small dams, still plans to divert 10 bcm of water from the Mekong or 20 percent of the total 54 bcm that Thailand contributes to the river.

Where does this put Vietnam?

The said projects, according to Nguyen Huu Chung of the Vietnam Mekong Development, were implemented by the Mekong River Commission which Vietnam says do not benefit Vietnam. Still, Vietnam bears most of the damage potentially caused by the projects. Worse, much needed water is withheld by the upstream countries, reducing irrigation potential in Vietnam and obstructing the free movement of fish and disrupting their reproductive cycle, critics charge.

Vietnam is complaining that much of the hydropower generated by the Mekong's waters is either used by the upstream countries or sold to Thailand, the most developed country along the Mekong.

Chung complains that because of the Mekong River Commission (set up by UNDP in 1995 to coordinate



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development projects along the Mekong), the upstream countries built infrastructures without consulting Vietnam, a violation of the original provisions of the 1957 Agreement (when Vietnam was still a member). It also deviates from the United Nations 1997 Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Water Course, which spell out responsibilities of upstream countries to downstream countries.

Chung's complaints stem from the fact that some upstream countries, like China, still hold the view that they have "absolute sovereignty" over water within their borders and have little obligation to their neighbors.

Vietnam is not the only one complaining. Thousands of residents along Mekong, especially from Laos and Thailand are up in arms about the series of developments along the river. First, the 60 MW Nam Leuk dam in Phou Khou Khuoay National Biodiversity Conservation area in Vientiane province, Laos, has worsened logging, the International River network for Southeast Asia (IRNSEA) says. Costing 130 million US dollars loaned out from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and completed three years ago, IRNSEA also alleges the environmental impact assessment of the dam is riddled with flaws.

Below Nam Leuk is the 210 MW Nam Theu Hinboun, located in Bolokhamaxai and Khammoune, Central Laos. It is being blamed by residents as the reason for major decline in fish harvests, flooding of fields and erosion of the agricultural land's fertile banks. Loans from ADB, as well as Swedish and Norwegian private firms, were used to build the dam, against much of the peoples' protests, iRNSEA reported.

The project that angers most Laotians is Nam Theu 2 also in Khammoune. It is the largest in the country and costs 1.2 billion dollars. The amount is three times more than Laotian government budget yearly and equivalent to the Laotian GDR. Laotians feel it is a waste of money, particularly so because there are no buyers of the hydroelectric power produced.

In Thailand, Thai communities along the Mekong, particularly those affected by the Pak Mun dam, are pushing the government hard to compensate them for their losses. The dam, a 136 MW hydropower project, is adversely affecting 30,000 people, causing decreased fish production, blocked migration of fish and responsibility for diseases like schistosomiasis and liver and intestinal flukes, critics say.

All said projects show indications of "development-gone-wrong." The Probe International, a private Canadian group working for pro-people development along Mekong says, "the hydropower development in the Mekong river is causing problems similar to those in the past. Private monopolies (instead of public monopolies) are being created resulting to pricing regimes that discriminate against consumers in favor of the private sector promoters. It is resulting in poorly designed regulatory regimes which lead to excess capacity, environmental destruction and inefficient energy use. Worse, it has displaced impoverished rural communities."

Probe added that because the projects are heavily subsidized by multinational development banks, export credit agencies and bilateral agencies, Mekong hydropower developers through extraordinary expropriation power given them, can externalize the real cost of their schemes.

The specter of a "water crisis" in this part of Southeast Asia is now not only due to scarcity and declining food production but also illogical national infrastructure planning which is affecting the already-drained national coffers of some countries. This is especially true for Laos.

The challenge now is to recognize water scarcity as an increasingly powerful cause of political and social instability, and to raise it to a higher place on the crowded policy agenda of affected governments.