Hydropower Projects on the Salween River: An Update

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Salween Watch

Over the past decade, plans for 13 hydropower projects have been proposed for the Salween River in China and another six in the lower reaches of the river in Burma and at the border of Thailand-Burma.

Very little information about the projects has been disclosed to the public. Unrest in the ethnic states of Burma has also hampered independent efforts to gather information but Thai and Burmese state and private agencies have also made little effort share the information.

In August 2013, according to a high ranking official in Burma’s Ministry of Electric Power, six hydropower projects are being developed on Burma’s Salween River including the Upper Salween Dam, also known as Kunlong Dam (1,400 MW), Nong Pha Dam (1,000 MW), Mai Tong Dam also known as Tasang Dam (7,110 MW), Manntaung on a tributary of the Salween (200 MW) (the four dams are located in Shan State), Ywathit Dam in Kayah (Karenni) State (4,000 MW) and Hat Gyi Dam in Karen State (1,360 MW). The projects are being developed jointly between Chinese corporations, Thailand’s EGAT International Co., Ltd. and Burmese investors. Once the project agreements are signed it is estimated that it will take about 4 to 10 years to complete construction.

A Thai news agency has also reported that two more projects named Mae Sariang 1 and Mae Sariang 2 are also being developed. It is assumed that the two projects are in fact the Wei Gyi and Dagwin Dams that have long been proposed to be built at the Thailand-Burma border. The two projects were originally mulled by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and an MoU has been signed with Burmese authorities on these two projects.

Originating in the Himalaya Mountain Range in Tibet, the Salween River flows through China’s Yunnan province into Burma and Thailand covering a length of 2,800 kilometers from the source down to the Andaman Sea. It is one of the last international rivers in the world which can still run free. It boasts one of the richest biodiversity sources of the region and is home to at least 13 ethnic groups, including the Nu, Lisu, Shan, Karen, Pa-o, Karenni, and Mon.

Salween Watch has been compiling information about the projects through its networks and would like to provide an annual update as follows:

Upper Salween Dams in China

The Nu River basin in China has a cascade of 13 dams planned, but construction has stopped several times due to civil society opposition and high seismic risks. In China's 12th Five Year Plan, five of the 13 dams proposed for the Nu are scheduled to start construction: Songta, Maji, Yabiluo, Liuku and Saige.
Songta dam, near the Tibet-Yunnan border, has already started early preparation work. NGOs visiting the construction site have been able to take photos of the early preparatory work underway.

Survey machinery and vehicles have also been seen at the other dam sites, especially Maji, but no major construction has started as of early 2014.

The Nu River is on a major fault line and geologists have warned of potential disasters if all the Nu dams go forward and impound water, further accelerating seismic activity. More than 10 different ethnic minorities live in the Nu river valley, and their livelihoods will be directly affected if relocated because of dam building. In a recent NGO report called “The Last Report of China's Rivers”, an alliance of 19 NGOs has called for the suspension of all Nu dams to save one of the last free flowing rivers for the Nu residents and future generations.

**Kunlong Dam**

Located in Northern Shan State, in an area inhabited by Shan and Kokang Chinese close to the Chinese border, the Kunlong dam project will have an installed capacity of 1,400 MW, of which 1,200 MW will be sold to China through a connection to the China Southern Power Grid. According to Hydrochina Kunming Engineering, several villages will be affected. An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been conducted, but no results have been made public. Construction has started in secrecy and substantial progress has been made.

In 2010, due to refusal of the Kokang resistance army to become a Border Guard Force (BGF), the Burma Army launched an offensive and seized control of the area, causing over 30,000 people to flee across the Chinese border.

In February 2010, the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) issued a report stating that apart from impacts on local villagers, the development of dams on the Salween River would hamper peace building in the country as the dam sites were located in armed conflict zones between the Burma Army troops and ethnic forces. They called for a halt to dam construction.

In a report launched on 13 February 2014, it was revealed that the area slated to be used for the construction of the dam in Kunlong township is not stable since it is close to the Kokang and Wa self-administrative regions, and there has been recent new displacement of villagers in Kutkhai due to skirmishes between Burma Army troops and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) as well as the KIA (Kachin Independence Army). At present, there are five battalions of the Burma Army based in Kunlong, just below the dam site.

According to SHRF, the construction of access roads to the Kunlong dam site has led to large scale land confiscation and destruction of houses, impacting over 60 villages with a population of around 20,000 people. The villagers have been given no compensation. At the dam site, about 500 workers are being employed at cement and gravel production plants.

**Nong Pha Dam**
Located in Shan State, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to develop the Nong Pha Dam dam project was signed during the trip of Chinese Vice President (and now President), Mr. Xi Jinping, to Burma in 2010. Only limited information about the project has been released and access to the project site is very difficult.

The Nong Pha Dam is a joint venture between the Burmese government, Burma’s International Group of Entrepreneurs (IGE) and Hydrochina Corporation with 15% of the shares being held by the Burmese government and the remaining 85% by the two corporations. The Nong Pha Dam will have an installed capacity of 1,200 MW, 90% of the power generated will be sold to China.

The dam is planned on a stretch of the Salween where various armed groups operate. Territory east of the river is controlled by the United Wa State Army (UWSA). In recent months, the Burma Army has been deploying troops and launching attacks against the Shan State Army-North, which controls territories south-west of the dam site.

**Tasang Dam**

Known by various names including the Mai Tong, the name of the township (Mong Ton) in which the dam is located in Shan State, the project is a joint-investment of EGAT International Co., Ltd. (EGAT’s subsidiary), China Three Gorges Project Corporation and Sinohydro (also known as Power China). According to EGAT, Tasang’s installed capacity will be 7,110 MW. EGAT International Co will hold 56.5% of the shares and plans to invest US$12 billion in the project.

Under a massive scorched earth campaign by the Burma Army starting in 1996, over 300,000 people have been forcibly relocated from their lands in southern Shan State, including from areas around the planned Tasang project site. In December 2013, SHRFL reported that residents in areas slated to be flooded by the Tasang Dam were forced to work for Burma Army troops providing security for teak logging in the potential reservoir area. It was reported that four Burma Army battalions had forced villagers in nine villages in Murng Pu Long township to lead the way during army patrols and to build and repair military barracks and roads. In addition, the troops extorted food and money from the local villagers. As a result of these serious abuses, there has been an ongoing influx of refugees into Thailand from Shan State.

A 40-year-old man who had run away from Murng Pu Long to a border town in Thailand’s Chiang Mai province said that his family had arrived there in 2013 as they could not bear being forced to work as porters of the Burma Army. Some villagers had almost stepped on landmines. “Forced to work (for the Burma Army), sometimes we had to work ten days and live off our own food. We could not do our own work. We had to carry heavy loads, and sometimes, we were barely able to walk.”

There are ongoing armed conflicts near the project site. In November 2013, clashes between the Shan State Army-South and the Burma Army took place near Ta Sob Bu on the Salween River.

**Ywathit Dam**

Located just north of the confluence of the Pai River and the Salween River in Kayah State (Karenri), the Ywathit Dam is being built and financed by Datang from China. A MoU to
develop the project with the government of Burma was signed in 2010. According to the MoU, the dam’s installed capacity would be 600 MW, but in March 2013, Datang’s website reported that the project’s installed capacity could be as high as 4,500 MW.

According to Karenni environmental groups, extensive logging concessions have been granted in the area around the Ywathit project site. Road access from Loikaw, Karenni State’s capital, to Bawlake and Ywathit has also been developed.

Villagers from the area around the Ywathit project site have been fleeing from armed conflict for more than a decade. Most have ended up as refugees along the Thai border, particularly in Mae Hong Son. However, according to the latest information, some villagers still live around the project site as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Karenni State has already suffered from the impacts of the Mobye Dam and Lawpita hydropower project for over three decades. The fourth largest hydropower plant in Burma, the Lawpita Project, uprooted more than 12,000 people. Thousands of troops from the Burma Army were deployed to provide safety to the plant, giving rise to numerous human rights abuses by the Burmese troops including sexual violence, killing, forced labor, etc. More than 18,000 mines have been planted around the plant and along the route of the transmission lines.

Since 2010, surveying work for the Ywathit Dam in preparation for construction has been conducted jointly by a Chinese and Burmese team. It was reported in December 2010 that a survey team was ambushed by Karenni resistance troops near Pruso, leading to the deaths of three Chinese engineers.

In 2011, new military camps for Border Guard Force No. 1005 and special security troops were established to protect the Chinese dam builders. Also, the Burma Army Tactical Commander under No. 55 Regional Command based in Bawlake has been visiting the Ywathit area to monitor and strengthen security for the dam building team.

The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) reached a 14-point ceasefire agreement with the Burma Army in 2012. This agreement stated: “to ensure transparency around planned mega-projects (including the Ywathit Hydropower Project), both parties agree to provide information to the public and to allow the local people and community-based organizations to seek information.” However, when local environmental groups tried to collect information from the area, their access to the dam site has been blocked.

The Karenni Civil Society Network reported in March 2014 that no new preparations for the dam construction have been observed. However, Burma Army troops still have a heavy presence in the area. In the middle of 2013, the government informed the Karenni National Progressive Party’s forces that they wanted to build a road to link the Burmese military strategic command in Shadaw, in northern Karenni State, to Ywathit.

Despite the ceasefire agreement signed with the KNPP, the Burma Army continues to conduct military training exercises in the area. In January 2014, 1,000 Burmese troops joined training
exercises, including firing mortars which caused deaths of livestock and scared villagers, who did not dare work in their fields.

The Karenni Civil Society Network also reported that government officials have been trying to promote dams on the Salween among affected villagers. On 18 October 2013. U Chit La, the Karenni State Minister of Transport and Saw Hu Hu, Karenni State Minister of Electricit Power and Industry organized a public hearing at Pasaung township to inform local people that after the completion of a new 700 MW dam on the Salween, the villagers would get electricity.

North of the dam site, logging is being undertaken by two companies, Kayah Htanee and Ashe Thanlwin, which are linked to local armed forces.

**Hat Gyi Dam**

The Hat Gyi Dam is located in Karen State about 47 kilometers from the Thailand-Burma border. The project is being jointly developed by EGAT International Co and China’s Sinohydro Corporation. With an installed capacity of 1,360 MW, the project is estimated to cost US$2.6 billion. The project has been met with opposition from local people on both sides of the border, particularly among villagers in Thailand from the districts of Mae Sariang and Sob Moei, in Mae Hong Son Province. They are concerned about the cross border impacts on the local ecology and fisheries, and the inundation of residential areas and farmlands along the Salween River.

According to reports by various local human rights groups, the project site of the Hat Gyi Dam and adjacent area has been used as a battlefield. A large number of local people have deserted the area and run away from serious human rights violations committed by the Burma Army troops and their allied militia, including military conscription, and rape.

In Thailand, the Office of the Prime Minister set up a subcommittee to study and monitor human rights impacts of the project in 2009. Public hearings were conducted in 2011. At a public hearing in Sob Moei District, Mae Hong Son, a number of affected villagers expressed their fears about the impacts of the dam in terms of the ecology, livelihoods and security of villagers in Burma, but no conclusions were reached during the public hearings.

The subcommittee submitted a set of recommendations to the government, including a proposed study of trans-boundary impacts covering villages in Thailand. Later, EGAT International commissioned Chula Unisearch to conduct an additional EIA of the Hat Gyi Dam along the Thailand-Burma border. According to the December 2013 version of the report, it was estimated that there would only be one family to suffer severe impacts (as the house is located at 48-57 meters above mean sea level in Ban Mae Sam Lab, Sobmoei District, MHS). The rest of the houses would only be minimally impacted.

EGAT and Chula Unisearch organized a small group meeting in Mae Sariang in late December 2013. But local villagers have submitted a letter opposing the study since it did not involve affected people and the classification of household risks is unacceptable since it does not take into account the impact on natural resources.
In the past several years, EGAT has continued to push the Hat Gyi project forward. It was reported that several attempts were made to approach the leaders of the Karen National Union (KNU) during 2012-2013. Villagers in Sobmoei district reported that the EGAT committee and a Chinese survey team have conducted research at the confluence where the project is to be built among residents in Sob Moei-Ban Mae Sam Laeb-Ban Tha Ta Fang. Local people were gravely worried since there was no attempt to approach the community prior to holding the hearing, even though the Office of the Prime Minister had made such a recommendation.

The attempts to develop large scale dam projects in Karen State have hampered peace negotiations between the KNU and the government. Despite the peace negotiations, there has been increased militarization by the Burma Army around the dam sites and the concerns of local communities about the impacts of the dams have been ignored. The rising tensions have made many people question the Burmese government’s sincerity in the peace process.

Previously, KNU had called for a suspension of the Hat Gyi Dam project until there is a political settlement to the conflict in Burma. However, owing to pressure from the Chinese corporations and EGAT, KNU had to concede to the demand to conduct the survey of the dam site.

At present, the Burma Army is continuing to build up its military presence around the Hat Gyi Dam, both on the west and east of the river, amassing about eight battalions.