

KIO warns China: Myitsone Dam could spark 'civil war'

Written by Thomas Maung Shwe

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Chiang Mai (Mizzima) - In an open letter sent to Chinese President Hu Jintao, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) has asked China to stop the planned Myitsone Dam to be built in Burma's northern Kachin state, warning that the controversial project could lead to civil war.

The English-language letter dated March 16 but only recently made public and obtained by *Mizzima* states that the KIO 'informed the military government that KIO would not be responsible for the civil war if the war broke out because of this hydropower plant project and the dam construction'.

The letter is signed by KIO chairman Lanyaw Zawng Hra.



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As the letter notes, relations between the Burmese regime and the KIO have taken a turn for the worse. 'Since September 1, 2010 when the Myanmar military government declared that [it] would deal with KIO as it did before [the] cease-fire agreement in 1994, the communication and cooperation between the KIO and [the] Myanmar government have halted'.

Myitsone Dam is the first of seven dams planned on a tributary of the Irrawaddy River to harness the hydropower of Burma's largest river.

China Power Investment Corporation (CPI), a state-owned electric company is leading the construction and financing of the dam which is set to be built at the confluence of the Mali Hka and Nmai Hka rivers, a location sacred to many Kachin. For the project, CPI has joined with Burma's state power utility Myanma Electric Power Enterprise (MEPE) and the Burmese conglomerate Asia World.

Dam threat to people and environment

The 152-metre high Myitsone Dam is the first in a series of seven on the Upper Irrawaddy that according to environmentalists will irreversibly change the lives of millions of people who live downstream, including in the Irrawaddy delta, which is the source of most of Burma's rice production. Chinese engineers operating the dams will have control over water levels in Burma's most important river, significantly altering transport, fishing and farming patterns that have been in existence for centuries.

CPI, Asia World and the Burmese regime have pressed ahead with plans for the Myitsone Dam despite widespread opposition from environmentalists, activists and local residents who will be the first affected by the dam. While the KIO has previously opposed the Myitsone Dam, the language contained in Lanyaw Zawng Hra's letter to the Chinese president is unprecedented in its criticism of the project.

While major armed hostilities between the KIO and the Burmese regime have yet to break out since Naypyitaw downgraded relations with the KIO to a pre-truce status, the 1994 cease-fire agreement appears all but dead. A telling sign of the policy change is that Burmese state media now refers to the KIO as 'insurgents'.

The letter to China states that the Burmese regime's Northern Command in Kachin State recently told the KIO that it will press ahead with 'security concerns and other necessary procedures will be launched in the above-mentioned six dam project location'. The letter continues, 'Myanmar military troops will not be allowed to invade the KIO area' during the current situation.

The Chinese government has been on friendly terms with the KIO and for decades China has allowed the KIO to operate on their border with Burma in exchange for access to the natural resources in territory the KIO controls. Analysts, however, point out that ties between China and the KIO are not as strong as between Beijing and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Burma's largest armed rebel group and the successor to the Burmese Communist Party which controls a large part of Shan State south of the China-Burma border.

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The London-based *Financial Times* reported in January that according to foreign diplomats in Beijing, KIO leaders visited Beijing several times last year to hold meetings with the Chinese government. Given the scale of CPI involvement in the upper Irrawaddy hydro-electric project it is very likely this was one of the key items on the agenda.

KIO’s long time opposition to dam

Reached for comment on its letter to China, the KIO deputy chief of foreign affairs, James Lum Dau, told *Mizzima*, ‘We have opposed this dam for a long time’. He added that the KIO is not totally opposed to dam construction ‘if they are willing to do smaller dams, that would be fine’. He said the size of the Myitsone project and the implications it has for such a huge number of people living downstream makes the dam totally unsuitable.

Noting that the Myitsone area is a key part of the Upper Irrawaddy, Burma’s largest and most important river, James Lum Dau added, ‘This is not only a matter for the Kachin but for all the people who live along the river’. James Lum Dau said he and other KIO representatives have told the Chinese government that the Myitsone has implications for ‘millions of people’ in Burma and therefore should not proceed as planned.

Environmental activists with the Burma Rivers Network, a coalition comprised of organizations representing various dam-affected communities in Burma and one of its members, the Kachin Development Networking Group, have reported that the creation of the Myitsone’s dam’s reservoir will flood an area larger than Singapore and will displace scores of villages with an estimated population of around 15,000 people while also destroying ecologically sensitive areas.

Since reports about the Upper Irrawaddy dam project first surfaced activists and local people immediately affected by the dam have urged the KIO to take a stronger stance against the project. The KIO chairman’s letter to China clearly indicates that public pressure has shaped the KIO view of the dam. Urging a rethink of the project, the letter states, ‘We also sense that the livelihood of the local people should be considered in a long-term process rather than in a short time’.

National League for Democracy also opposes dam

In addition to the KIO, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy has also come out against the dam. In an interview conducted with *Mizzima* in January, NLD cofounder Win Tin said he worried ramifications of the project would lead to increased ethnic tension in a country wracked by decades of civil war and ethnic conflict. Win Tin said he feared Kachin people affected by the project ‘may not be able to discern that this is a project imposed on them by the SPDC and does not represent the will of the majority of Burma’s people’.

CPI’s partner in the project, Asia World, is controlled by Stephen Law and his family and according to reports the firm will receive a lucrative profit from the dam project. Law’s father, Lo Sit Han, the chairman of Asia World, has been labeled a ‘narco warlord’ and linked to money laundering by the US government.

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While the KIO indicated in the letter that they are not totally opposed to the other six dams set to be constructed on the Upper Irrawaddy, with regards to those dams, it said, ‘We have also informed Asia World Co. Ltd. to make a decision only after assessing the consequences of the dam construction’. This suggests they want to see the results of a social and environmental impact study before plans for the dams move forward.

Majority of electricity generated to go to China

An article in the industry journal *Power in Asia* published last September said that the massive seven-dam project on the Upper Irrawaddy will generate a combined capacity of 16,500 MW, slightly less than the present 18,200 MW generating capacity of China’s huge Three Gorges Dam, the world’s largest dam.

However, the benefits of the dams for Burma appear to be limited to royalties for the Burmese

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government. According to an article in China's state-controlled *Kunming Daily* in October 2008, when the project is finished the 'majority of the electricity' generated by the dams will be exported to China.

Bomb blasts at dam site raise tensions

On April 17, 2010, a series of at least 10 separate bombs exploded at the Myitsone Dam construction site. The blasts were reported to have injured at least one Chinese worker and destroyed several temporary buildings and vehicles owned by Asia World.

Shortly after the explosions the Burmese regime arrested more than 70 local people. The majority were affiliated with the KIO youth wing, the Education and Economic Development for Youth. The KIO denied any responsibility for the bombs and eventually most of the people jailed in an investigation were freed.

Dam completion not possible without KIO cooperation

As the KIO letter to China points out, previous work on the Myitsone dam project performed by CPI and Asia World took place after the Burmese authorities explicitly asked the KIO for permission to send engineers and other staff to the area controlled by the KIO. This was made possible by the liaison offices the KIO had established in Burmese regime territory. However, all cooperation between the KIO and the Burmese regime has ended.

In late 2010, the Burmese regime ordered the closing of most of the KIO liaison offices throughout the rest of Kachin State and parts of neighboring Shan State, in territory the regime controls or areas in which the KIO has only partial authority. The liaison offices were established as part of the cease-fire agreement to ensure the truce went smoothly and to maintain lines of communication.

As the letter noted, 'The upstream areas north of the Mali-Nmai Dam Project are the locations where KIO military centers are stationed'. Given the strategic location of the area and the importance it has to the Kachin people, it is unlikely that the KIO will give up their territory without a fight.