

ROOTS AND RESILIENCE



Tasang dam threatens war-torn Shan communities





"It's been over ten years since we were forced out of our village, but I still dream of returning home one day. If the Tasang dam is built, my home will be flooded and my dream will be lost forever." - 54-year-old Loong Mai, from Ho Ha village along the Pang River, a tributary of the Salween in Shan State, Burma

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Summary

The Tasang dam, the largest planned for the trans-national Salween River, will submerge 870 kilometers in the heartland of Shan State, Burma. The dam is located in the midst of a conflict area where Shan resistance forces have been fighting the Burmese military regime for over four decades.

From 1996-1998, 300,000 people were forcibly relocated in the State by the Burma Army as part of an anti-insurgency campaign. 60,000 of those lived in the areas adjoining the Tasang dam site and its projected flood zone. Of this 60,000, it is estimated that only about a third remain, either living in relocation sites or attempting to survive around their old villages. The majority have fled to Thailand.

This book focuses on what we call the “Keng Kham Community” which comprises six village tracts and over 100 villages, most lying within the Tasang flood zone. Before forced relocation began in 1996, the total population of Keng Kham was an estimated 14,800. Family members have since been separated from each other and many have not been able to rebuild their villages. The population has now dwindled to approximately 3,000. The population remains fluid as family members come and go depending on security, farm needs, and the economic situation in Thailand.

The impact of the forced relocation has been devastating to Keng Kham. Thousands of acres of formerly fertile farmlands are laying fallow and villages lie deserted, their ornate teak temples and houses dilapidated and overgrown. Despite being under military assault over the past decades, those from Keng Kham have been struggling to survive and maintain their way of life and centuries-old culture.

Yet the Tasang dam will be a death knell for Keng Kham, submerging the culture along with the communities there. Initial surveys for the dam began in 1998, in the midst of the relocation campaign. Chinese and Thai companies are eager to begin construction and have already held a ground-breaking ceremony. The project continues to be delayed by the instability of the area surrounding the dam site, however.

Areas south and southeast of the dam site are under the control of the United Wa State Army (UWSA), a ceasefire group. Since early 2009 the Burmese regime has been putting pressure on ceasefire armies to transform into “Border Guard Forces” which will be fully under Burma Army control. Many of the ceasefire groups, including the UWSA, are resisting this, throwing into doubt the stability of former ceasefire territories. This will directly threaten the security of the main supply route from Thailand to the Tasang dam-site, which is also the expected route of the power transmission lines.

Meanwhile rampant logging carries on unabated in areas surrounding the dam site. Hard wood trees including teak are being clear cut for transport and sale in China and Thailand.

The following pages offer a unique insight into the remote and little-known area of Keng Kham, its ecology, its culture and its people. All of this will be lost under the flood of the Tasang Dam. As a Shan environmental organization, we call for a halt the Tasang dam.

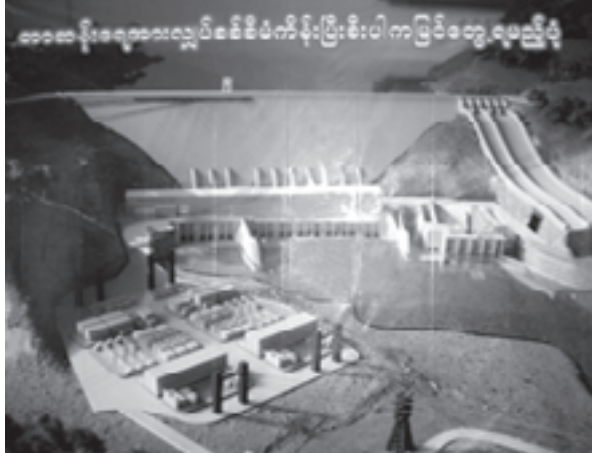


Part 1

Tasang Dam Project

Dams on the Salween

The Salween, Southeast Asia's longest free-flowing river, is under threat by a series of dams planned by the Chinese, Thai and Burmese governments. Five of the dams are planned in Burma; the largest of these is Tasang. All are located in civil war areas where abuse of the local population, including forced labor, forced relocation, and land confiscation by the Burma Army is common. Tens of thousands will be displaced by the dams upstream and a half million impacted in the delta downstream. Three of the dams will flood areas of outstanding biodiversity and one will submerge the homeland of the last remaining Yin Ta Lai people, who now number just 1,000. The majority of power from the dams is slated for sale to Thailand, providing revenues to the military ruling Burma but not electricity to a domestic population that faces chronic energy shortages.



Graphic of Tasang Dam project

Tasang Dam

66 miles from the Thai border
228 meters high (tallest in Southeast Asia)
7,110 MW installed capacity
35,446 Ghw annual electricity production,
mostly for sale to Thailand
Estimated flood zone of 870 square km
Construction costs: at least US\$ 6 billion

CHINA'S DAM BUILDING

Assessments stop at the border

A cascade of thirteen dams is also planned in China, where the river is called the Nu Jiang. The Three Parallel area, where the upper reaches of the Salween, Mekong, and Yantze, run together, has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. Years of controversy and debate in China have delayed the project and in May 2009 the Prime Minister halted construction of the hydroelectric plant of the first dam. A spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry called for ecological assessments of trans-boundary rivers also in May 2009.¹

Standards not yet implemented

A set of guidelines that will require Chinese companies operating overseas to follow environmental standards is awaiting approval from the relevant authorities after being drafted by the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Ministry of Commerce in China. The guidelines will require Chinese companies to abide by international environmental treaties China has signed. If China's environmental standards are higher than the project host country's, Chinese standards should be followed. China's outbound investors will be asked to review any environmental impact of projects before they are started.²

To date no plans to study trans-boundary impacts to the Salween have been disclosed and no environmental or social assessments of the Tasang project have been made public, either from the Chinese or Thai companies involved.

Investors in the Tasang Dam

Burma's military regime initially signed deals with Thailand's MDX Group for implementation of the Tasang Dam in Shan State. Amidst rumors of dissatisfaction with MDX, the China Gezhouba Group Company (CGGC) won a contract for initial dam construction in early 2007.

In November 2007 the Burmese regime gave CGGC a 51% stake in the project, reducing the MDX share to 24%. Burma's Department of Hydropower Implementation maintains a 25% stake. MDX did not confirm the change at the time but Burma's Ministry of Electric Power said that "(MDX Group) has been implementing the project for a decade but there has been no significant progress. So the government handed it over to the Chinese consortium."³

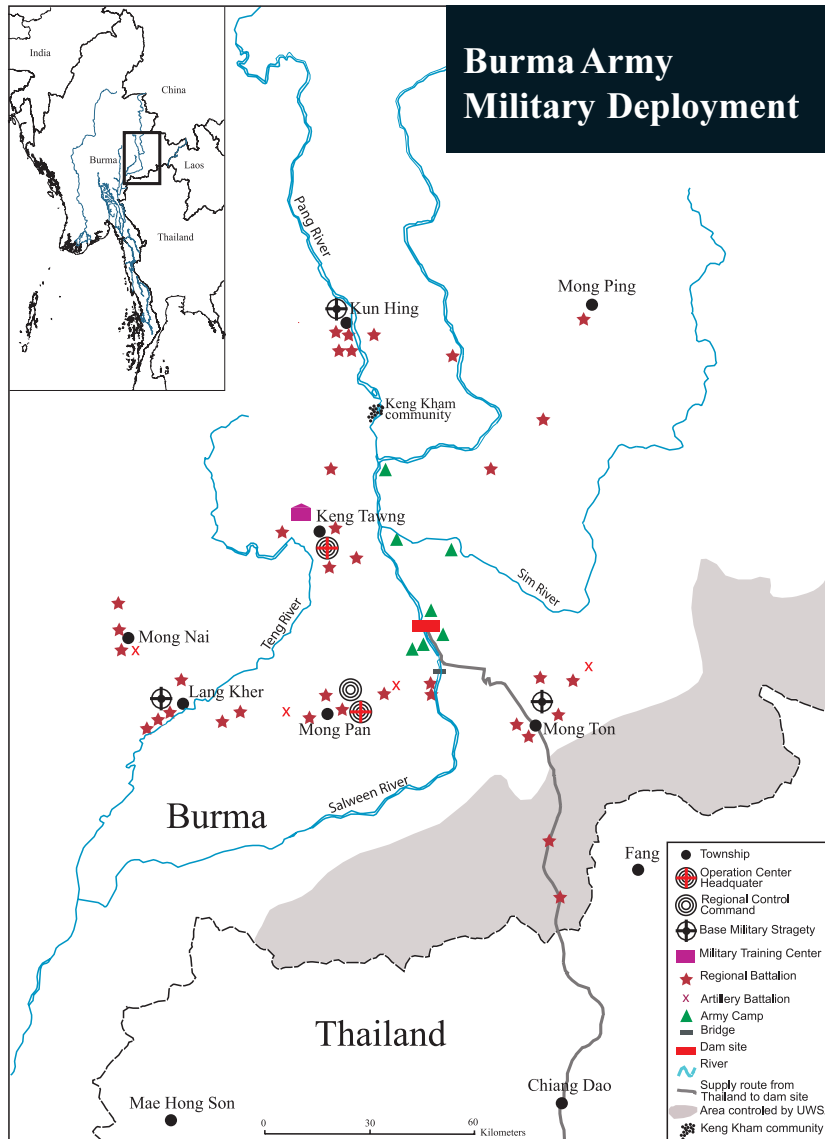
In mid-2008, Sinohydro, China Southern Power Grid Company, and China Three Gorges Project Corporation signed an agreement for the development of the Salween River Basin in Burma, mentioning the Tasang Dam in particular. The British firm Malcolm Dunstan Associates has also been involved in the project.⁴

CGGC

China Gezhouba Group Corporation is a large state-owned development company which builds and finances dams overseas. CGGC was the main contractor of China's massive Three Gorges Hydroelectric Project and has worked in over 30 countries in Asia and Africa. It now holds the majority stake in the Tasang project.

MDX Public Company Ltd.

MDX is a Bangkok-based real estate and infrastructure development company that was established in 1988 and has operations throughout the Mekong region. After a period of financial difficulty that included suspension from the Stock Exchange of Thailand, MDX returned to public trading in August 2007.⁵



Wa-controlled area according to 20-year anniversary publication of the
United Wa State Army



During site visit by Regional Commander Major General Khin Maung Myint

Tasang: A continuing war zone

The Tasang dam is located in the midst of a conflict area where Shan resistance forces have been fighting the Burmese military regime for over four decades. Burma Army troops have been increasingly moving into the area over the past decade; since 1996 the number battalions has more than tripled. Today there are 36 regional battalions as well as several artillery battalions, army camps, and military training and command centers (see map). Each battalion has an average of 50 soldiers at any given time.



Ongoing abuses cause villagers to flee into Thailand

The Shan Women's Action Network has documented sexual violence by Burma Army troops against hundreds of women living around the Tasang dam site. Abuses are ongoing. One 28-year old woman who recently arrived in Thailand from Ho Yan village tract told her story:

“I came to Thailand because I don't want to do run away anymore and I don't want to do any more work for the Burmese military. We had to walk seven hours on foot and then continued by car to get here.

Villagers started going back to live in our village after we were forced to move out in 1996. But in June 2008, there was fighting between the Burmese and Shan armies at Kun Huay and Na Kea. After the fighting the Burmese soldiers went from one village to another searching for the Shan Army. They suspected villagers had contacted the Shan Army and they threatened that if we didn't tell the truth they would burn the village.

They arrested the village head from Pa Par village as a hostage for the villagers to find Shan Army leaders. Finally each household had to give 5,000 Kyat and 60 kilograms of pork for the release of the village head.

One week later soldiers raped one woman at Pa Par Village. Her husband had run away and she was alone at home. After the rape she complained to the head of Burmese military but they denied the case.

When things like this happen, villagers are too scared to continue to live in the village. Before my village had about 30 households but now there are just about 10 households left.”



Project Status

An official opening ceremony held at Tasang on March 29, 2007 was attended by high-ranking military officials and representatives of the Thai MDX company. Four hundred villagers from the surrounding area were forced to attend the ceremony.⁶ Despite some developments since the ceremony, several conflicts at the dam site have hindered progress of the project, leaving the exact timeline of dam construction uncertain.⁷



MDX trucks like this one can pass through the border checkpoint to deliver cement and other materials which are off-loaded to bigger trucks on the Burma side

One-sided border opening

When Thai local authorities opened the Thai border crossing point south of Mong Ton known as BP1 Border checkpoint in January 2008, Thai traders and businessmen were excited about new opportunities on the Burma side. However until today Burma continues to keep the border closed from its side, ensuring a handsome income from bribes extorted from the hundreds of migrants who continue daily to cross “unofficially” into Thailand. Only the Thai company MDX has been allowed by the Burmese authorities to use the border crossing - a special status which presumably could be retracted as arbitrarily as it was granted.



Developments at the Dam Site

MDX has finished building 6 houses, one big office, and a health care center in Sala Village, ten kilometers south of the dam site (seen above). In early February 2009, MDX began construction of a huge building, setting out about 100 posts also in Sala. No progress has been made on the building, however, and construction remains delayed as of May 2009. A Burma Army outpost keeps guard of the village.

In early 2009 most MDX staff went back to Thailand, with the exception of a few people responsible for the project who are renting a hotel and based in Mong Ton and one high official from MDX staying in Sala Village. This is believed to be a temporary arrangement.



Rampant Logging

Logs are transported after the rainy season. From January to May 2009, Century Dragon, a logging company of Tay Za, a close associate of the Burmese generals, and the Wa-controlled Hong Pang Company were actively logging from the east banks of the Salween inland. In the past Thai Sawat logged only big trees in this area, but today's loggers are clear-cutting everything. Most of the forests in the Mong Pu Long area are now gone. Recently Hong Pang Company also started building a logging road west of the Salween between Mong Pan and Tasang. In various areas logs are floated down the Salween for sale in Thailand or sent up the Mekong for sale in China.

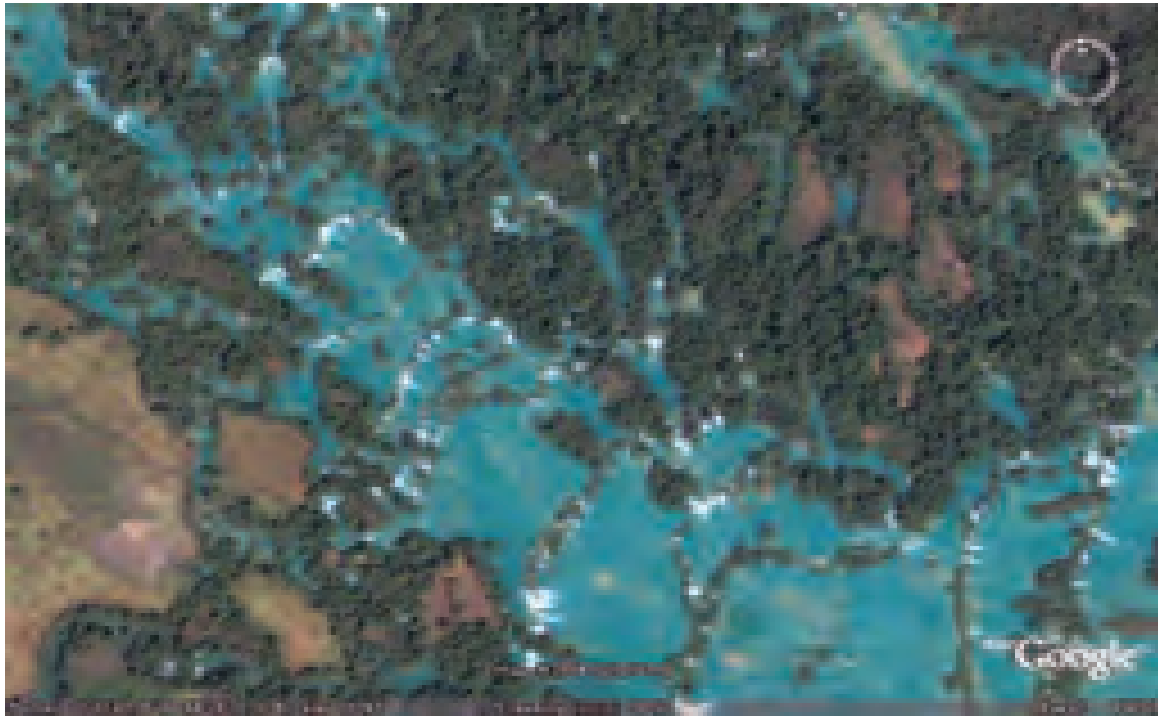


Conflicts Delay Road Maintenance

In 2008 the Wa, a powerfully armed ethnic ceasefire group, seized equipment of Thai Sawat, a former Thai logging company operating in the area. The main Thai contractor for the dam (MDX Company) was using the equipment for road construction and maintenance. The rains started early, in April, and lasted until November, making the road between Tasang and Mong Ton extremely difficult to drive (the 33 mile trek takes nearly two weeks).

Projected Flood Zone of Tasang Reservoir

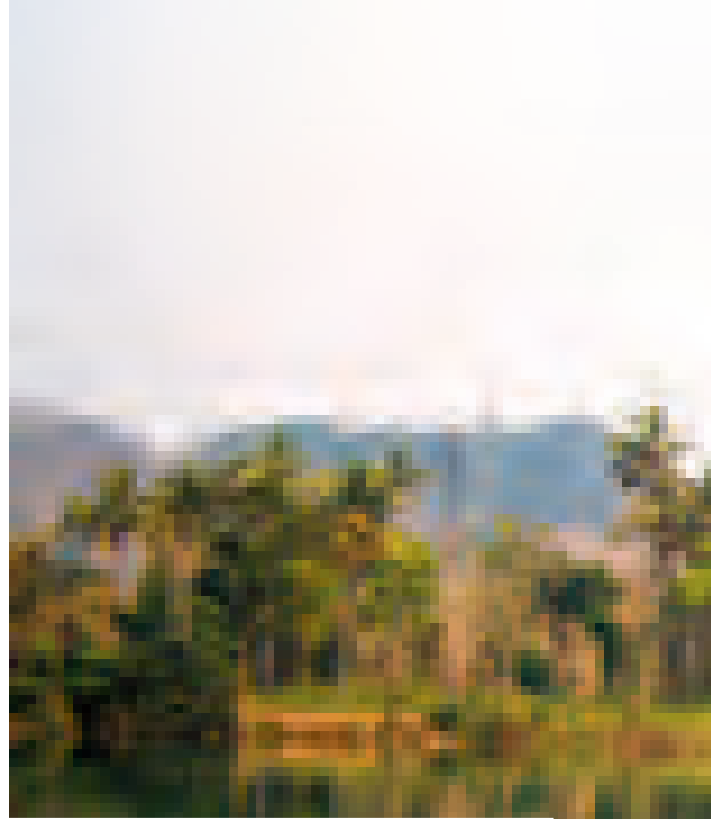




Part 2

Keng Kham Community

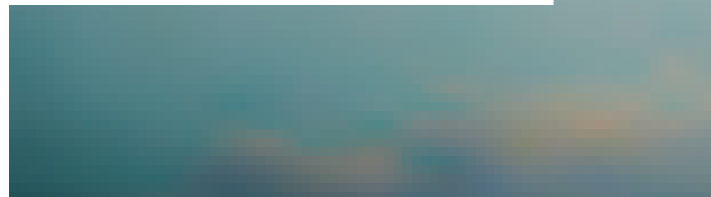
“Keng Kham Community” is located along the Pang River and on its numerous islands. The edge of Keng Kham reaches the Salween River 35 miles upstream of the Tasang Dam. This community will be directly impacted from the Tasang Reservoir when the dam is finished as nearly all the 114 villages will go under water.



Pang River and One Thousand Islands

The Pang River flows through the center of Shan State, running through Mong Hsu, Ke See, and Kun Hing. Before reaching Keng Kham, the Pang divides into three parallel rivers at Ho Yan village tract, bending around the mountain and creating islands within the river, hence the name of the township Kun Hing (“Kun” meaning “island” in Shan and “Heng” meaning “one thousand”).

As the Pang River flows down from the mountain and into the Salween, it creates a series of six big waterfalls and several small waterfalls. The falls and islands are unique ecosystems that are home to various fish and plants.







Keng Kham is an “unseen” place in Shan State, rarely visited by outsiders and still maintaining traditional rural ways of life. Only a few villages are accessible by car road. People mainly travel by ox cart, bicycle, and walking.







Life in Hiding

The situation for those that live in Keng Kham is constantly precarious. Villagers often have to hide from passing Burma Army patrols to avoid harassment, extortion, forced labor, or interrogation. The islands are a haven for some as villagers are able to flee at an instant on small boats and hide out among the islands until it is safe to return. Boats have been taken by Burma Army soldiers; to avoid this villagers have built their own modest boats that are not attractive for seizure.

Keng Kham Temple

The Keng Kham Temple is the most significant cultural landmark for the Keng Kham Community. The temple has one main pagoda and 24 smaller surrounding pagodas.

Due to the forced relocation, which included the burning of houses and villages, many written historical documents of the temple have been destroyed or lost. Older persons used to record the history by hand writing but these records are almost all gone.

According to local people, the temple was built when the Shan Princes still ruled Shan State (before World War 2). At the time, Keng Kham was under the rule of Sao Jee Lak, the Mong Nai Princess. During that time, there were culture performances on traditional festival days. Each village would take responsibility for Shan cultural dances such as the Kenneri Dance (of the mythical half-bird half woman creature), the “To” Dance, the Dragon Dance, etc.

During the forced relocation campaign that began in 1996 in Shan State, Shan temples were destroyed by the Burma Army or abandoned by communities forced out of their villages and afraid to return. Over the years, hundreds of Shan families have struggled to survive, coming back and forth when it is safe. However, the temples rely on donations of the community, so even when some villagers moved back, their continued impoverishment made it impossible to maintain the old temples. With meager means, the villagers re-built more modest temples to preserve the worship spaces and give the community a place to hold traditional cultural festivals. After years of struggle and survival, Kheng Kham, its people and culture may be lost under the flood waters of the Tasang Dam.





Fourth Month Full Moon Festival (last week of March)

This festival, at the end of the cold season and beginning of the summer, is the time villagers have finished the harvest and celebrate before the next farming season begins. The festival starts on the night before the full moon when villagers light candles at the pagodas. When morning comes up, villagers have an offering ceremony for the monks at the temple, and then visit different caves. There they wash the statues of Buddha and replace the old robes with new ones.





Keng Kham Caves

There are four caves that are important areas of worship located near the villages of Keng Kham: Kong Cave, Na Lang Cave, Kang Cave, and Nong Kho Cave. Kong Cave is the biggest.



All of the caves have numerous statues of Buddha.



Poi Sang Long

This community festival starts the last week of March and lasts until the first week of May. The main purpose of this festival is to bring young boys to become novices. They will enter into the temple to study and learn the basic concepts of Buddhism. Every year the villages come together and hold the festival in rotation. Houses from neighboring villages are invited to join and people visit each other's festivals during this time.





A native of Keng Kham, 85-year old Paw Tao Ma Ha, remembers that the community was crowded with people in his childhood and they celebrated the end of Buddhist Lent (Ouk Wa) and Fourth Month Full Moon Day (Boi Len Si) with festivals. The harvest is finished and rainy season has not arrived, so Shan people take the chance to visit each other in different places. He remembers:

“The various village tracts would perform different culture shows, and each village hosted a one-day event until every village performed their own dance, and then they would all perform together. My village performed the Dragon Dance.

For Boi Len Si, people from different towns came to visit the Keng Kham Pagoda. They would light candles on the night before Full Moon, and celebrate all night with different cultural performances. It was a peaceful time and everyone was happy, especially the children. The village head led the parade which paid respect to the prince and the prince would give a prize to the village. All of this happiness has disappeared now.”







Preparing food for special community ceremonies

Above: Men collect soft coconut tree stems; carry them back to the village; women and children cut the stems and begin cooking *Mun Maprao* soup. Opposite: children clean forest vegetables.





Our Rivers, Our Future

Women's lives are interdependent with nature because we must collect vegetables, firewood, and traditional medicines for the sustenance and health of our families. The natural environment must be preserved for the survival of our future generations and the most important component is water and our rivers.

But now Burma's military government is going to build dams on our Salween River for their own interest. Before building the dams they are logging and constructing the road to carry materials to the dam site. At the same time the number of soldiers is increasing for the dam's security. This situation is making it very difficult and unsafe for women who depend on the forest around the Tasang dam. *Written by the Shan Women's Action Network*





A prize: feeding salt to livestock so that they return home on time

Community Farming

Despite massive de-population that began in 1996, local people are still living together in harmony, holding on to their rich culture and livelihoods. Villages in the rural area organize to help each other with planting and harvesting. Before the season starts, villagers have their own knowledge of which farms need to be planted first. They begin with these farms and then help each other to finish one by one. There are no charges and no payments for this work; instead they compensate labor by giving rice.





Photo SRDC

Low Land Farming

Keng Kham, Kun Pu, Ngar Tan, Ngar Boi, and Loi Keng tracts all lie in flat land areas. Villagers depend on the river, diverting water for their farming through self-made irrigation dams.



Traditional Water Use

In many highland areas villagers build a “ferris wheel” to capture the natural energy of waterfalls to mill rice, grind sesame for oil, and refine sugar cane.



In Keng Kham village tract, villagers collectively maintain six irrigation dams for the thousands of acres of paddy fields. They elect a leader of the dam who arranges work teams every year before the rains and makes sure people will get an equal share of the water. The work teams are composed of farmers who will use the water; they build and fix the dams. In the other village tracts, villagers divert water from the nearby waterfalls.

Paw Tao Ma Ha, age 85, came to Thailand to join his children in 2008. After being forced out of his home in 1996, he returned and tried to keep living in his old village with his youngest son. But Burma Army soldiers often came to the village and arrested and beat those suspected of contacting Shan soldiers. Villagers often had to run and hide; only coming back when it was safe. After years of struggling to survive in his homeland and maintain his culture, Paw Tao Ma Ha reflected on the future:

“If the water from the dam floods the land, I’ll be very sad. I don’t want our Pagoda and our land to go under the water. I often dream of my homeland. My parents and my relatives are buried there. My spirit is there; I am connected to this land. If I die, my spirit will be there. I don’t want anybody to destroy this land. When the military burned our village and forced us out from our homeland, we still had the land. If the water floods over, we will have nothing left.”





The site of the Kun Long (Upper Thanlwin) Dam

Kun Long Dam

In addition to the Tasang Dam, Chinese companies are planning to build the Kun Long dam (or Upper Thanlwin (Salween) dam) in Shan State. The dam site is located on the mainstream Salween at Ton Gyap village in Kun Long Township, approximately 25 kilometers from the border with China's Yunnan Province.

China's Hanergy Holding Group (formerly Farsighted Investment Group) and Gold Water Resources Company announced an agreement for implementation of the Upper Thanlwin Dam in April 2007. The dam will have a total installed capacity of 2,400 MW. A team of Chinese and Burmese technicians have been conducting feasibility studies for the project, including collecting geological samples.

We are joined by
a growing
movement of
people from
Burma, Thailand,
and China that
continue to
oppose the
construction of all
the dams on the
Salween. Our
movement is
critical, for as
Loong Mai says:
“The dam spells
the end of our way
of life. The
livelihoods of
those who lived
along the Salween
will perish together
with the river
itself.”



Population of Keng Kham Community

No	Village Tract Name	Households before 1996	Households 2009	Remark
1.	Loi Keng	720	209	22 Villages
2.	Keng Kham	349	73	4 Villages
3.	Nger Tan	406	134	13 Villages
4.	Nar Poi	255	166	30 Villages
5.	Ho Yan	1,030	270	30 Villages
6.	Kun Pu	201	144	15 Villages
Total		2,961	996	114 Villages

Before forced relocation began in 1996, the total population of Keng Kham was an estimated 14,800. Each family had an average of five members and a typical village contained 1-300 households. A survey conducted in 2009 found that the number of households is now significantly lower. Family members have been separated from each other and many have not been able to rebuild their villages. Some live in relocation sites, some live in hiding around the villages, and some have fled to Thailand. Today the population has dwindled to approximately 3,000, with an average family containing only 3 members.

Footnotes

- ¹ “China says hydropower development on transnational rivers subject to ecological assessment,” Xinhua, May 21, 2009.
- ² “Green rules eye Chinese firms abroad,” China Daily, May 29, 2009.
- ³ <http://www.mmmtimes.com/no393/b004.htm>, “Chinese firm takes 51pc of Tasang hydropower project,” Myanmar Times, November 19-25, 2007.
- ⁴ <http://www.rccdams.co.uk/about.htm>, accessed July 14, 2009.
- ⁵ เนชั่น ทันข่าว 20 กรกฎาคม 2550 เอ็มดีเอ็กซ์กลับเทรด 1 สิงหาคม 2550 เป็นต้นไป
- ⁶ Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization press release on MDX Ground Breaking Ceremony, March 29, 2007.
- ⁷ Based on a series of interviews with local sources and surveys of the area conducted by Sapawa from June 2008 – February 2009. The identity of the interviewees must remain anonymous for their security.

Published by Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization in July 2009

For comprehensive information on the Salween dams, please visit
www.salweenwatch.org or www.burmariversnetwork.org