Disaster worries plague Three Gorges Dam

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- Comments

**GT:** The State Council has set the goal that the living standard of those displaced by the Three Gorges Dam must reach the average level in Chongqing and Hubei by 2020. Is this attainable? What are the difficulties facing emigrants?

**Zhang:** In my opinion, this goal could be achieved with little difficulty. But it also depends on the overall social environment. More than 1 million people displaced by this project and their living standards before the move varied. It is difficult to set one standard to make all these people satisfied. But as far as I know, most of these emigrants are living better lives, particularly those who previously lived in mountainous areas.

Whether we can achieve this goal by 2020 depends on the improvement of the society, particularly in terms of distribution mechanisms that still need a lot work to be done since the start of reform and opening-up three decades ago. They may get enough capital to give compensation for the emigrants, but they cannot guarantee that every one will become rich.

**Fan:** Despite the resolution to improve the well-being of those displaced, we still face poignant problems. Some newly built emigrant towns or villages have faced geological hazards, which were not examined properly in the first place. Obviously many new sites of towns were not carefully examined before the government moving residents in, who then faced geological hazard such as landslides and had to be relocated again. Some residents in Badong county, Hubei Province were moved three times before they could settle down.

Some remedial measures, if taken properly, can ameliorate the situation locally but will not probably address the problem immediately, because nobody is sure about the hazardous spots. Economically, the displaced people are generally worse off. Acute feelings of deprivation may badly affect them in particular those who in the past were financially much better off. This may provoke social agitation.

**GT:** Some people attribute the extreme drought in recent years to the building of the Three Gorges Dam. Do they have a case?
Zhang: It is absurd. There are more than 20 dams in the world larger than the Three Gorges Dam. But I never heard of them causing droughts. The big flood last year could be a good refutation of this claim. It is impossible for it to cause both drought and flood.

Drought is caused by abnormal climate, which is a global problem. The dam may have certain effects on the local climate, but should not have an effect on the overall climate.

Fan: Currently it is unlikely to assert this relation due to the absence of long-term climate data: It has been too short a time since we built the dam.

However, it appears that extreme aridity occurs more frequently than before in recent years in areas along the Yangtze River downstream of the dam. There are direct explanations accounting for this phenomenon, albeit not very convincing ones.

The dam came at the cost of downstream areas' demands for water. The dam completely changed the cyclical water flow of Yangtze River, for the sake of generating electricity. Each year, the dam starts raising the water level from the end of September and October, when water flow is at its peak.

Then the dam starts discharging its reservoir after January to generate electricity. It usually has to empty its reservoir before May in preparation for the floods. Thus the drastic change of water level increases the difficulty in irrigation.

However, it is unfair to say the dam has single-handedly caused the drought. In fact all the dams astraddle rivers and streams that join in the Yangtze River have exacerbated the problem. Weng Lida, former head of Yangtze River Resources Protection Bureau, in his co-authored work Yangtze Conservation and Development Report 2007, argued that the Yangtze River will be cut off if all the scheduled dams along the Yangtze River and its tributary streams are finished.

Wang Di contributed to this story.