Activists argue that “dams will kill the mighty Mekong”
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**VietNamNet Bridge** – Losses in aquaculture and farm production could easily outstrip any profit from power generation if planned Mekong River dams are built in China, Laos and Cambodia, says a Can Tho University professor.

**UN says China dams threaten water supplies to Mekong delta farmers**

A forum organized by the Can Tho City government and a number of NGOs active in Vietnam and nearby countries on 3 February addressed the topic “The environment and livelihoods along the Mekong River.” The discussion aimed at finding ways to preserve the river’s rich bounty in the face of a rush to build dams in the river’s upper reaches. Reporters from the HCM City-based newspaper *Tuoi Tre* were present.

The ecosystems on which the prosperity of the Mekong River Delta depends are in double jeopardy. Experts have warned that the Delta is being seriously affected by climate change. The construction of dams upriver will increase the stresses on the Delta ecosystems.

Surveys in 2009 showed that many areas in An Giang province, far from the mouths of the river, have been affected by salt water. In some places, the river water level has fallen nearly 1m, a highly abnormal phenomenon.

Landslides are increasing along the banks of the Tien Giang, the upper branch of the Mekong.

Dao Trong Tu, former vice secretary general of the Vietnam Committee for Mekong River, said that China is already building three of 16 planned hydropower dams while Laos wants to build an additional nine, and Cambodia two, dams on the river.

**Electricity is not food**

“We want to eat fish; we cannot live by eating electricity,” said La Chhuon, from the Oxfam Australia office in Cambodia, quoting Cambodian fishermen who live in the areas where dams are about to built. (Cambodia is making surveys for the construction of two hydropower dams on the Mekong between Phnom Penh and the Lao border).

Chhuon said that none of the fishermen interviewed were happy with the project of losing their livelihoods. They don’t want financial compensation. “If fishermen are moved to the mountain, what can they do to support their life?” Chhuon asked.

Dao Trong Tu said that the construction of dams will change the annual rhythm of flood and ebb, block the migration of fish and aquatic mammals, reduce the volume of alluvial soil, and otherwise do serious harm to the downstream area.

Dr. Carl Middleton of the International River Organisation, an American NGO, agreed with Tu, saying that the planned dam building not only affects the migration of aquatic animals but also seriously threatens food security in the region.

Middleton estimated that the countries located in the Mekong River basin will lose between 700,000 and 1.6 million tons of river fisheries...
production each year owing to the planned dams. The people along the river and in its delta, he pointed out, cannot easily switch to raising cattle and poultry as alternatives to their traditional reliance on protein from fish and aquatic products.

Meanwhile, Mak Sithrith, director of the Cambodian Fisheries Alliance, expressed worry that fisheries will be reduced because of dams. As a consequence, he predicted, fishermen will intensify efforts to catch fish in the remaining areas to offset the loss of other fisheries, resulting in exhaustion of aquatic resources and environmental pollution.

Are the dams really necessary?

Chuenchom, speaking for a Thai NGO, said that forecasts of electricity consumption in Thailand are always higher than actual consumption because the forecasts are the justification for private, semi-private and state companies to implement more hydropower projects and make more profits.

She said that many retired officials are on the payrolls of these companies. To get at the root of the problem, Chuenchom argued, profit considerations should be swept aside in planning power projects, and there must be realistic forecasts of electricity demand. “Natural resources can satisfy our needs but cannot satisfy our greed,” she emphasized.

Nguyen Huu Thien, an agronomist and wetlands specialist, warned that if 11 dams are built in Laos and Cambodia, the flow of the Mekong River would be under the control of the 11 plant managers. Once the river is barred by these dams, Thien predicted, the volume of rich silt carried to the Delta by the Mekong will fall drastically. The people who live in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta will have to pay more for fertilizer. Industries like fish processing and agricultural processing will be hard hit also. Thien calculated that the total loss of seafood and agricultural production may be greater than the value of electricity generation achieved by the hydropower plants.

Dr. Duong Van Ni from the Can Tho University said that after a survey trip to northern Cambodia with other sub-Mekong Region officials, Chinese experts realized that 50 percent of the items that are used by farm families there come from China. “China builds dams to develop industry,” Ni observed, “but if they have more products but the people who would buy them are impoverished, how can they sell them?”

Convincing data is needed

Nguyen Hieu Trung, dean of the Faculty for Environment and Natural Resources at Can Tho university, said that organizations and scientists should research, compile and publish data that proves the harmful impact of the planned hydropower dams on the economy, society and the environment – data that compels governments to reconsider their construction.

Dao Trong Tu, the former Mekong River Commission official, reminded that every nation has the right to build dams on its own territory. However, each nation must also bear in mind the impacts on its neighbors, he said, and seek to minimize bad consequences.

Tran Van Tu of the Vietnam Alliance of Scientific and Technological Association’s Can Tho branch, commented that it is man’s activities that threaten the Mekong River so the solutions must also come from man. He said it is not useful to confront governments, but essential to make every effort to persuade them.

A vice chairman of Can Tho City, Nguyen Thanh Son, underlined the consequences of failure. Protecting the environment and the productivity of the Mekong River is a vital requirement of the region, he said. “If a country seeks to take water just to satisfy its own need, there will be impacts on other countries. The long-term development in the entire region may come to a virtual standstill.”

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